

**Ascendance of a
Bookworm: Part 1
Daughter of a
Soldier Volume 2**

Miya Kazuki

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ASCENDANCE OF A BOOKWORM

I'll do anything to
become a librarian!

Part 1 Daughter of a
Soldier Vol.2

Author: **Miya Kazuki**

Illustrator: **You Shiina**



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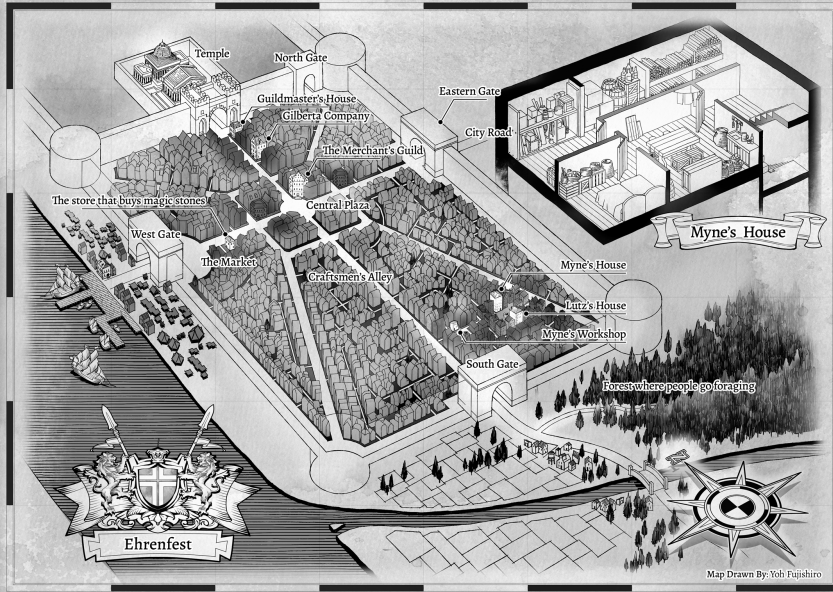


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Prologue

“Tuuli, would you please peel these potatoffels for me?”

“Okaaay.” At her mother’s request, Tuuli took a seat and readied her knife. They were preparing lunch. While peeling the potatoffel skin, she glanced at the door that Myne had left through.

Apparently, she was introducing Lutz to one of their father’s coworkers. They left a lot earlier than the planned meeting time of third bell, but regardless, Tuuli didn’t think that the introduction would go well.

“She’s trying really hard to make this happen, but it’s just gonna be impossible, right? Shouldn’t you have stopped her, Mom?”

“I don’t think Lutz will become a traveling merchant, but he needs to learn that for himself. And it’s rare for Myne to get this enthusiastic about something, so I don’t see the issue.” Effa, also peeling potatoffels, shrugged and explained that in the first place she wasn’t expecting much from Myne’s efforts. Her expression said that she was dead confident that Myne would fail.

It was only the day before yesterday that Myne learned that introducing a friend to your father’s coworker was the same thing as asking for an introduction to apprentice work. She had hurriedly prepared and went to the forest yesterday to get Lutz cleaned up. His hair ended up shockingly blonde and silky, but when it came to taking on an apprentice, there were more important things than looks.

Tuuli really didn’t expect that anyone would hire Lutz through trust in Myne alone. That said, she felt kind of weird seeing Myne work as hard as she had been lately. Her sister hadn’t been this hard of a worker a year ago.

“...It feels like Myne isn’t Myne lately. She still gets sick and passes out all the time, but she doesn’t cry about things being unfair anymore. Though I guess she does cry about not being able to do things, and then gets all upset if someone tries to do them for her.”

At one point, Tuuli’s little sister had spent all her time getting mad at her for being healthy and getting to go outside while she was stuck in the house, but that was a thing of the past. Myne was still getting sick, but she was also doing what she wanted to do, challenging the world and getting depressed when she failed.

“Oh sweetie, that’s just what happens when a child grows up. Babies have to be taken care of, but over time they grow to dislike

that and want to take care of themselves. But they aren't prepared to do that yet, so they get upset. You acted the same way when you were turning three." Effa smiled, remembering the past.

Tuuli herself didn't remember how she acted all that time ago. She got a little embarrassed at the thought of her trying to take care of herself, failing, and getting upset. But there was something about Effa's statement that felt off. Tuuli compared herself to Myne and tilted her head in thought.

"You said I acted like that while I was turning three, right? Doesn't that mean Myne's growing up late?"

"She is. But when you think about how she's physically stunted, well, I suppose it makes sense that emotional growth would be stunted too. Now that she's finally gotten more healthy, she has the room to grow up. It might be difficult for you, Tuuli, but please let Myne do as she wishes for now. She'll become more capable over time, more understanding of her limits, and eventually she'll stop pushing herself too far."

"...That reminds me, she was trying to get strong enough to gather and draw water in my place after my baptism. She got really depressed when she couldn't manage it at all." Tuuli thought back to Myne's recent behavior. She was asking for all sorts of bizarre things like usual, but she could change on her own, and she could both relieve herself and clean up after herself without any help. Tuuli definitely had less of a burden on her shoulders than back when Myne would spend all day throwing tantrums.

Gathering was a more complex story. The first day she walked to the forest on her own, she stealthily made clay tablets with Lutz's help, which Fey and his cronies then crushed. She got so mad her eyes flashed like a rainbow. But nowadays she didn't cause any problems at the forest. She was too weak to do much gathering, but when compared to a three year old going to the forest for the first time, that was reasonable.

"She really can do a lot more than she used to. I hope she'll keep getting more healthy."

"I can imagine that the interview will fail and she'll come home depressed. When that happens, cheer her up for me. Myne did her best here," said Effa, standing up with her peeled potatofuffs.

Tuuli gathered the skins and stood up as well to help prepare the rest of lunch. At the time, she didn't expect in even her wildest dreams that Myne had actually paved the way toward being a merchant apprentice, albeit with a few conditions to overcome.

The Road to Washi

It was time to make *washi*, traditional Japanese paper. I was finally in a position where I could make it. Or rather, in a position where someone else — Lutz — would make it for me. As a part of his job, even. How wonderful.

On the way home from the interview with a merchant, I was practically skipping along the road with excitement. Mentally speaking, I felt like I could jump in the air and spin at least twice before landing like a figure skater.

“Eheheheh. Ahahah.”

“Myne, I get that you’re happy, but c’mon. Don’t get too excited. Do ya want to catch another fever?”

“How could I not be excited? I mean, we’re making paper here! Paper! I can make books with paper. Ahaha, yes!” How could I stay calm with books getting ever closer?

Lutz, watching me start to actually skip along the road, put his hands on his head and sighed. “...Myne, alright, we’re making paper. But how are we gonna do it? I’ve got no clue myself. Don’t we need tools or something? Is this gonna work?”

Lutz’s calm questions threw a bucket of cold water over my excitement. After returning to reality, I paled at the truth of my situation. I knew how to make washi, definitely. I even had vague recollections of what tools were involved. There was a book I read about disappearing crafts and all that. But I didn’t remember the exact details on how to make the tools to make paper. Without those tools, I had no way of making the paper itself.

...Guuuh, I have to start with making tools. Aaah! Once again, I know all but the most important things.

“Hey, Myne. You sure got quiet all of a sudden. Don’t tell me that you don’t actually know how to make paper.”

Lutz gave me a really uneasy look, so I hurriedly shook my head. “Don’t be silly. I definitely know how to make paper. I’ve been trying to make it for so long now. But I’m not strong enough to cut trees or draw water from the well, and I can’t even do things like start fires or crush fibers. I needed help, but I couldn’t ask others to make paper for me. That’d be too selfish, so...”

“You coulda just asked me if you needed help that bad.” Lutz pursed his lips a bit, looking a little frustrated. I was glad he was

willing to help, but making paper was a lot of hard work. It was on a different level from digging holes or helping carve branches.

"The thing is, um, all I can do is tell you what needs to be done. It's not like before where we worked together to do things. From start to finish, you'll be doing almost all of the work to make paper yourself. Are you really okay with that?"

"Duh, 'course I am. You think up things, I make them. That's the promise we made, right?" Lutz nodded immediately, but I had to make sure he was fine with that promise. It was possible that he had just gotten caught up in the atmosphere of the interview and didn't really think about it before agreeing.

"So, like, Lutz we have to start by making the tools needed for paper. Do you think you can do that?"

"...You'll be with me, right?"

"Of course. I'll do everything I can." With that said, I fell into thought. I had to remember what tools were needed before we could make them. While I was at it, I needed to search through my home to see if anything could be replaced with something simpler. That might get Mom mad at me, but I had no other choice given how poor I was. "I'll write down the tools we need and start looking for things we can use in place of them. If I can't, we'll have to make them ourselves. First, I want you to find trees that will make good paper."

"What about the trees in the forest?"

"Well, the thing is, I don't know which trees in the forest will make good paper." I knew which Japanese trees would make good washi, but the trees of this world were alien to me. "Umm, let's see. What we want here are trees with long, strong fibers. The fibers also need to be sticky, so they'll clump together. We need a lot of fibers from each tree, too, but... I don't know how to check and see what kind of fibers a tree has."

Not to mention that some trees were only good for chopping at certain points in their lifespan. I knew of a tree species that made great paper after one year, but then hardened up after two years such that its fibers were unusable. That knowledge didn't help me actually look at trees and identify how old they were, though. I really was useless.

"...I mean, I dunno which trees are like that either."

"Basically, there are probably soft trees and hard trees, but I want young, soft trees."

"Yeah, they do get harder as the years go on." Any kind of tree was too hard for me to cut, but Lutz had a lot of experience in the forest and could apparently tell which trees were soft and easier to cut than others.

"Well, you can make paper out of basically any plant, even

bamboo, but the easier it is the better it will be for us. Plus, if we're going to commoditize this stuff, we want wood that's easy to work with." If plant paper entered the marketplace, we had to plan ahead to avoid running out of material. "If possible, we want a tree that can be cultivated and grown just for paper. But I'm guessing you can't tell which are easier to grow?"

"Actually, I can. They're pretty different. I know of some trees that are really easy to grow."

"Really?!" I could only grit my teeth in frustration over my own ignorance of the world born from being a sick shut-in.

Only a month had passed since I had worked up the strength to go to the forest. I had never even chopped wood before; it was beyond me to pick wood for something. "I'll leave picking the wood to you, Lutz. We'll try out lots of different kinds and find which one works best, so just think of any soft trees you can. Also, I want you to find (tororo)."

"The heck is that?"

"Well, it's like sticky stuff that can help keep the fibers together. I don't actually know if there's any of it around here. Do you know of any trees... or, well, fruits even, that have thick and sticky juices?"

Lutz fell into thought. Apparently nothing immediately came to mind. "Eeeh... I'll ask someone who knows more about this stuff than me."

"Okay. I'll try to remember what exactly we need, and then write down the steps to make paper. Then I'll think about how to make those tools."

Our conversation came to a close right as we reached my place.

"We're here. Alright, let's get to work!" Lutz's eyes were gleaming, filled to the brim with motivation. I gave a firm nod and went inside.

"Welcome back. Don't feel bad, Myne. You'll be useful to someone someday."

"Bwuh? Tuuli, what's going on?"

"You just have to try harder next time. Okay?"

The moment I went inside, both Mom and Tuuli started consoling me for some reason.

"The interview went really well. He had some conditions, but he agreed to potentially hire us."

"Whaaaat?!" The two of them looked extremely shocked.

I turned my back to them and took out my stone slate as they started talking about celebrating. I had to write down what tools we needed while thinking about how to make washi. "I have to get ready for stuff, so..."

"Tests for apprentice work are really serious. Good luck!" said Tuuli supportively.

I nodded, readied my stone pen, and began imagining the process of making paper. First, I needed to chop down the trees and plants that would become the core of the paper. Lutz had something like a hatchet, so he could cut trees whenever we needed. Which meant we didn't need any special tools for that step. Next.

Generally, you would steam the wood to peel off the black outer layer. We needed a steamer. If we had one in the kitchen, I could use that. I checked but didn't find one, which made me realize we hadn't had any steamed food before. It wouldn't be surprising if we didn't have a steamer. I wrote down "steamer" and "pot" on the slate. Next.

The steamed wood would be dunked in water and have its outer layer peeled while it was still hot. We would have to do the steaming and peeling by the river, but since we had knives, that step wouldn't be a problem. Next.

Drying them, leaving them dunked in the river for over a day, and peeling the inner white layer didn't take any particular tools either. A knife would be enough. Next.

The white layer would need to be boiled with ash, softened, and have the impurities removed. In short, we needed ash and a pot. We could reuse the pot from the steaming, but getting ash would be more difficult. Mom would never give me any, and I didn't know if the ashes formed from steaming would count. I wrote down "ashes." Next.

After leaving the boiled white layer dunked in the water for a full day, we needed to wash off the ashes and let it dry under the sun, which would also bleach it. After that, we would take out damaged fibers. We could do all that with our hands, no tools necessary. Next.

Hit the fibers like crazy until they look like cotton. We would need a mallet or something to land decent blows on the fibers. We could probably make something resembling a mallet out of firewood. I wrote down "wood shaped into a rectangle." Next.

Mix the beaten fibers with water and tororo. We would need a bucket or tub to mix everything. After that was done, the pulpy mixture needed to be flattened with a *suketa*, a bamboo screen held in place with a frame. The pulp would end up spread across the screen and dry into paper. Making a *suketa* would probably be our biggest hurdle. I wrote down "tub" and "*suketa*." Next.

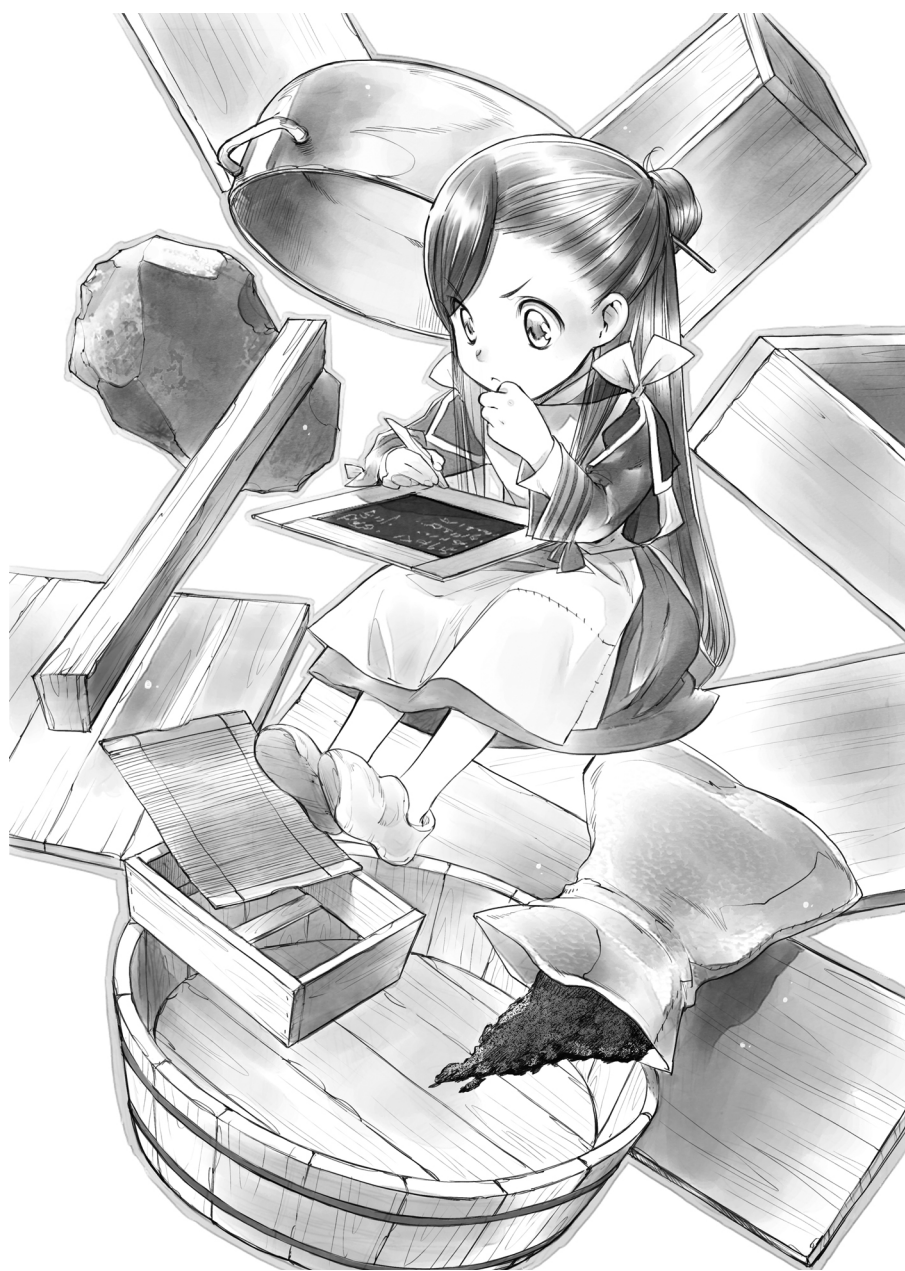
Take the screen out of the frame and move the filtered paper onto the drying bed. As the name implied, the drying bed was a place to put finished paper to dry. All you had to do was stack the day's worth of paper onto it and, after a full day, the water will have drained out. I wrote down "paper stand." Next.

After that, put gentle pressure on the paper with weights to squeeze more water out. If you leave the paper pressed for a full day, most of the tororo's stickiness will apparently go away. What could we

use as weights? We definitely had weights for squeezing out oil, but I didn't know if Lutz could use them. Just in case, I wrote down "weights."

After pressing the pieces of paper, peel them off the drying bed one by one and put them on a board. I wrote down "flat board." Once the pieces of paper dried under the sun for a bit, we just had to peel them off and we were done.

"Mmm, now that I think about it, we sure need a lot of things..." We needed a steamer, a pot, a mallet, ashes, a tub, a suketa, a drying bed, weights, and a flat board. Not to mention the wood and tororo. I remembered most of the washi making process from pictures and illustrations I had seen, but given that I had never actually made any myself, I couldn't recall the exact details. For example, the best wood-to-tororo fiber ratio.



Regardless, at some point I had seen an offbeat celebrity on TV making paper for a variety show. If a celebrity could do it, how could I not?

...I tried thinking back to the TV show. You can do it, memory! *Actually, that celebrity definitely borrowed all those tools. They didn't make anything themselves. And they had an instructor guiding them, too. Guh!*

Despite having the knowledge, my real-life experience ended at making postcards in class from the paper used to make milk cartons. That was better than having absolutely zero experience, but it was hardly worthwhile.

Anyway, I figured it was worth a shot to try making at least a postcard's worth of paper here. Smaller tools would be easier to make, and it would be faster to experiment with different types of wood if we made smaller sized pieces of paper.

"Okay, Lutz. Let's try making the steamer first." Chinese cooks often used rounded, basket-like steamers, but those would be hard for us to make. Square basket-like steamers, on the other hand, shouldn't be too bad at all. I drew a rough sketch on my slate and showed it to Lutz.

"Looks pretty simple to make, but do you got any nails?"

"Wha?! Can't you just... bend the twigs and fit everything together?"

"What...?"

The problem with making tools? We didn't have the tools to make tools. We could cut wood, but we didn't have nails. In this world, nails were too expensive for kids to get their hands on easily. To make matters worse, even though we had tools to cut wood, we didn't have tools for more precise carving.

It'd be great if I could borrow Dad's tools and carve the pieces of wood to slot together like Edo period sashimono, but I didn't have the knowledge or craftsmanship necessary to do that. Anyway, if it was simple enough that Lutz could do it after hearing an explanation, it wouldn't be something worthy of needing "craftsmanship."

Nails were something useful in daily life, and thus they were sold in smitheries that dealt with metal goods, but we had no capital to buy things with. We were doomed from the start.

"What're we gonna do, Myne?"

"Ngh. I'll try talking to Otto about this. He might be willing to pay me in nails for my assistant work." The only thing I could do was go to the one place that would pay me for my work.

A day passed, and I went to the gate and asked Otto about the

nails. "Mr. Otto, I have a question. How much do nails cost? If you know a cheap place to buy them, please tell me."

"...Why nails? You can't even use them, Myne." Indeed. I didn't have the muscles to use a hammer. Otto could understand why I wanted ink and pens, but not nails.

I shook my head and explained with a sigh. "I want to make the tools I need for making paper, but I don't have the tools I need to make those tools."

"Ahahahahaha!" Otto laughed, hitting the table as he did so. It was pretty funny that the day after I had confidently told Benno that I'd have the paper ready by spring, I would come to Otto saying I couldn't make it. Unfortunately, I had no choice but to make a fool of myself here.

I glared at Otto, pouting. He wiped the tears of laughter out of his eyes and shot me a grin. It looked warm on the outside, but it was the dark grin of a merchant.

Otto noticed me reflexively putting on my guard, so he gave an actual grin. "If you tell me how to make the stuff that turns hair silky, I'll give you all the nails you need."

That wasn't a good deal at all. If Otto spilled the beans to Benno, I'd lose one of the cards I had that gave me power. The losses were simply too great.

"...That information is too valuable for just nails. Judging by Benno's reaction yesterday, I can imagine that stuff will make for a very profitable product."

"Heh. Nice eye," Otto murmured, a little impressed.

I shrugged and started thinking as hard as I could. If I lost Otto's support, I'd have nowhere else to go. *Hmm... I wonder why Otto wants to know about the shampoo? Unlike Benno, he's not a merchant. I doubt he'd try selling it on the market. Maybe he wants to earn a favor with Benno?*

...Otto's better groomed than your average guy here, but he doesn't seem the type to care that much about his hair. If anyone wanted the shampoo, it would be a girl... A girl?! His wife?! If his beloved wife wants the shampoo, it all makes sense.

"...Mr. Otto, I can't tell you how to make it, but I don't mind trading with you."

Otto raised an eyebrow. Judging by his interest, he wasn't too caught up in knowing how to make the shampoo specifically.

With success in sight, I took another step forward. "Ummm, okay. I'll teach Mrs. Corinna how to use it and then make her hair all silky for her. I don't mind demonstrating, since just having the stuff isn't enough to do anything with it."

"Alright. You've got a deal." Otto nodded without taking even a

second to think. I figured that bringing Corinna into this would be effective, but I hadn't expected it to go that well. "How about you come to my place the next day I have off? We can trade then."

"That sounds fair."

And so it was decided that, on Otto's next day off, I would take my simple all-in-one shampoo to his place and become a hair stylist (shampoo only). I was relieved to get nails, but at this rate, I'd be losing my share of the shampoo. Though, since the shampoo would run out eventually, I could guess that Otto would be bargaining with me more in the future.

"Lutz, I found a way to get nails."

"For real? That's awesome, Myne."

"Uh huh. I had to trade some (simple all-in-one shampoo) for it, though, and I don't have much of it left. Will you help me make some more today?"

"Yeah, sure." I figured it would be best to take the opportunity to make a lot of shampoo so that I would have extra for future bargaining purposes.

"Meryls will start growing in a bit, but in this season, rio fruit are the best for this." We gathered rio fruit in the forest and Lutz crushed them at my place for their oil. Lutz couldn't use the weights yet either, so he hit them with a hammer. I threw some herbs into the squeezed oil bit by bit.

"Wow. This stuff's pretty easy to make, huh?"

"Mhm. The most important part is mixing the right herbs with the right oil. That's why it's okay to trade the finished stuff for what we want, but not how to make it. Be sure not to tell anyone how to make it, okay? No matter what."

"Why?"

"It's so simple that if you tell somebody how to make it once, they'll be able to make it on their own. They won't ever trade for it again."

"Huh, alright. I get it."

I put my finished shampoo into a small jar and handed it to Lutz, who blinked in confusion. "Wha? I don't need this. You're the one who got all this stuff together, you can have it."

"You deserve at least this much for your help, and Mrs. Karla will definitely appreciate it. She was all over you about it, right?" Lutz had mentioned how much of a pain his mom had been when I cleaned his hair before the interview. I hadn't seen Karla since then, so she was probably asking Lutz about it constantly.

"Oooh, that's a good point. Thanks, Myne." Lutz happily took the shampoo and I smiled at him much like Otto would.

“Don’t tell her how to make it, no matter how hard she gets onto you about it. Give the goods, but not the info. This is practice for the future. A merchant has a lot of things he needs to keep secret, so...”

“...Can’t I start practicing with something easier?”

I giggled at Lutz as he slumped over wearily. ...*Still, I didn’t expect that nails would end up being this big of an obstacle for us. The road to washi might be longer than I thought.*

Invitation to the Otto Residence

Several days later, I received an official letter of invitation from Corinna through Otto.

“Isn’t a letter of invitation a bit much for a little kid like me? Aren’t these usually sent to parents? It’ll be up to my Mom and Dad whether I can even go in the first place,” I said, which caused Otto to raise an eyebrow and shake his head.

“You’re the only one in your family who can read properly, remember? And you can’t decline this invitation anyway. If you do, your mom and older sister will probably get fired from their jobs.”

“Wha?! Wh-Why is that?!”

Apparently, Corinna belonged to a wealthy merchant family, and thanks in part to her skills as a seamstress, she was an influential member of the Tailors’ Guild. After much explanation, I learned that, allegorically, Tuuli’s apprenticeship was like the position of part-time worker, Mom as a full-time dyer was like a store manager, and finally Corinna being a higher-up in the Guild was like being on the board of directors. In short: status-based societies were scary. If someone above you in status invited you somewhere, there was simply no way you could refuse. *Okay. I’ll remember that.*

Incidentally, if this were a summons from Otto rather than Corinna, Dad could refuse it thanks to being a higher ranked soldier. *This could get complicated.*

“Plus, I was thinking this would be a good opportunity for you to learn about letters of invitation.”

“I see. Thank you.”

Otto taught me how to write a response to a letter of invitation, which was written on a thin sheet of wood.

“An invitation from Lady Corinna?! To you, Myne?! Why?!”

“Otto told her about our (simple all-in-one shampoo) and she wanted to try it out.”

“My goodness! I can’t believe this!” Mom fell into a panic the moment she saw the official invitation I came home with. She was panicking so hard I asked if I should turn the summons down, which made her eyes shoot open with anger. “Don’t be ridiculous! You have to be polite and not offend her!”

“Understood! I’ll be careful.” Otto was apparently right. The

invitation was more of a summons than anything.

Mom hurriedly began to fix up my apron. My normal clothing would be too rude to visit Corinna with, it seemed. As she did so, she gave me as many warnings as she could think of about how to properly respond to a letter of invitation without being rude. I was just going to teach her how to use the shampoo, but for some reason everyone was going crazy about it.

“Aw, I’m so jealous, Myne... And I’m the one who made the stuff, too.”

“Can Tuuli go with me, Mom?”

“Don’t even think about it! She wasn’t invited.” I had thought up the shampoo myself, but Tuuli was the one actually making it. To me it made sense for Tuuli to go as well, but apparently it would be very rude to bring her along uninvited, so no matter how envious Tuuli was, she had to stay home.

Just like last time, I would be meeting Otto at third bell by the plaza. After putting the apron Mom fixed up for me on top of my usual clothing, I headed there with Dad. Inside my usual tote bag was a small jar of shampoo and a comb.

When we arrived at the fountain in the plaza, Otto was already there waiting. “Fear not, Captain. I take full responsibility for your daughter and will ensure she remains safe. Okay, let’s go, Myne.”

“Okay. Bye, Dad.” I waved goodbye to Dad and started walking in the direction of the castle walls with Otto.

Otto’s place was apparently close to the inner wall. As rent got higher the closer you got to the nobles’ quarter beyond the wall, I could presume that Otto lived in a fairly high-class area. “Mr. Otto, you’re living this close to the inner wall even though you work as a soldier?”

“My pay could never cover this. Corinna’s family gave us an upper floor of their home. Her elder brother, reluctant to give up his cute little sister, insisted on it.”

Speaking of which, I did remember hearing at some point that Otto had married into Corinna’s family rather than vice versa. That made sense; without the help of his wife’s family, a low ranking soldier could never afford a home in this rich part of the city. I could imagine that Otto, poor as he was having spent all of his life savings on buying citizenship, didn’t exactly put Corinna’s family in the best situation.

The further north we went, the more my surroundings and the people within them changed. Clothes ceased being hand-me-downs and began to have extravagant styles with fluttering excess cloth. The stores located on the first floor of buildings changed as well. They grew larger with more employees, and a greater number of customers

were going in and out. More carriages were traveling across the main street and less of them were pulled by donkeys.

It was shocking to me that the city would change so much within my own walking distance. I had read about status-based societies in books, and I knew what they were like on paper, but the reality was far different from what I had imagined. I looked all over the place while blinking in surprise.

“Here’s the place. I live on the third floor.”

“Third floor?!” Otto lived on the third floor of a seven-story building. It was common for buildings to have a store on the first floor with the owner of the store living on the second floor with their family. The third through sixth floors tended to be rented out, and the top floor often housed live-in apprentices and workers.

Homes got more expensive the closer they were to a well and to the main street. I lived on the fifth floor of a building closer to the gate than anything, which should tell you all you need to know about my family’s economic status. Since Otto’s family was given the floor right above the owner’s floor, I could imagine that Otto’s wife was the prize daughter of a wealthy company.

Well... I’m impressed they let the marriage happen. Consider me surprised. I get the feeling that there’s a pretty big status difference between a traveling merchant and a company daughter.

“I’m home, Corinna. Myne’s with me.”

“Welcome, Myne. Thank you for coming. I am Corinna, Otto’s wife.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Corinna. I’m Myne. I owe a lot to Mr. Otto.”

I was seeing Corinna for the first time and she was shockingly cute, perhaps the most adorable woman I had ever seen. Her pale cream-colored hair, resembling a full moon beaming with sunlight, was fluffy yet held together in such a way that accentuated the slender nape of her neck. Her eyes were silvery gray, which gave her entire body a sort of pale splendor. Corinna defined the phrase ephemeral beauty.

And yet... her boobs were huge. Her parts that stuck out really stuck out, giving her a perfect hourglass figure complete with a tight waist. ...*Mr. Otto, you’re so SHALLOW!*

We went to the parlor and I couldn’t help but let out an awed gasp at the beautiful patchwork tapestries hanging from the walls. It was my first time seeing a home with such lively decoration in this world. I could tell from the amount of clothes and scraps of cloth that this room was for negotiating with customers and talking about work. There was something about the decorations that made me feel relaxed.

That said, for the home of a wealthy merchant, the place was a lot

more plain and simple than I expected. The tables, chairs, and furniture had no designs carved into them, nor were they polished to a shine. They were simple and made of wood. I did remember reading a book that mentioned the homes of northern countries tended to be simple so that they could endure constant use throughout snowed-in winters.

“Myne, I do appreciate you coming all this way for me. I heard from Otto that you have devised a substance which cleans the hair. I’ve been quite looking forward to this,” said Corina as she poured me herb tea. I could tell just from her gentle voice and tone that she was the well-raised daughter of a wealthy family. She had the warm, fluffy atmosphere of a woman whose mere presence provided spiritual healing. I felt an urge to protect her rising within me.

“I’ve been looking forward to meeting you too, Corinna. You’re just as beautiful as I heard, and the outfits you have on display here are even more impressive than I had expected.”

“...I see you are quite the polite little girl. And your hair is as pretty as Otto suggested. Will my hair become as silky as yours, I wonder?” Corinna stroked my hair with enraptured eyes. In order to make the shampoo look as impressive as possible, Mom and Tuuli both scrubbed my hair as clean as they could last night. My hair was even more silky than usual.

“Shall we begin without further ado?” I took out the jar from my tote bag and Corinna’s face brightened up. The way she showed her emotions so honestly was very cute. I could understand why Otto doted on her so much. “We have to prepare your hair for the washing first. Might I ask for a bucket of water, and a cloth for wiping your hair?”

Otto got to work immediately, as if silently saying that physical labor was best left for men. As he got the water ready, Corinna changed into clothes that she wouldn’t mind getting wet. I lined up a cloth for wiping, the small jar, and the comb next to Otto as he prepared the bucket.

“So this is the stuff, huh? How’s it work?” Otto, eyes gleaming with interest, shook the jar, peered inside, and smelled its contents. I suddenly had horrible visions of Otto getting in the way of the hair washing, not shutting up, trying to flirt with Corinna, and basically just being a pain in my side.

“Mr. Otto, please wait in a separate room once the water is ready. It would be very boorish of you to spy on a woman prettying herself up.”

“Quite so. Otto dear, please wait outside.” With Corinna’s support, we managed to force Otto out of the bedroom despite his determination to stay inside. I could hear his footsteps as he paced

outside of the door, but I blocked it out and picked up the jar. Then, with Corinna's full attention, I began pouring it into the bucket while giving an explanation of what I was doing.

"This is called (simple all-in-one shampoo). Fill the bucket about half full with water, then pour this much of the shampoo inside of it. We will be dipping your hair into this and cleaning it. Would you please undo your hair?"

Corinna undid her hair and timidly dipped it into the bucket. Her hair wasn't as dirty as I had expected, perhaps due to her having washed it ahead of time. I splashed more and more water on her hair to clean it down to the roots. "Be especially sure to clean your scalp thoroughly."

"...Having another clean my hair feels quite nice. I hadn't the faintest idea this would be so pleasant."

"I'm sure Otto would gladly wash your hair for you if you asked," I said. After a pause, I continued with, "He would probably butt in even if you didn't ask."

Corinna gave a quiet laugh. "Oh my, was it not boorish to observe a woman while she's prettying up?"

"...I just said that because I didn't want him flirting with you while I was working."

"Oh my! Aha, I do wonder how Otto behaves outside of the house, if a little girl such as yourself would fear that from him."

Corinna had more hair than Tuuli and thus washing it was more difficult, but there was no mistaking that the number of nails I would receive depended directly on how satisfied Corinna was with the shampoo. I used the extent of my skill to wash her hair as thoroughly as possible.

"...Myne, sweetie. Might I ask you something?" said Corinna, her tone a bit more stiff than before. I reflexively tensed up, fearing that she was about to ask me how to make the shampoo. "Truly, what is Otto like when working at the gate?"

Her question was so unexpected that I couldn't help but let out a surprised "Huh?"

Corinna's expression clouded. "He abandoned his life as a merchant for me, so I can't help but feel a tad worried..."

"Ohhh, you don't need to worry about that. He's still being quite the merchant at the gate." Despite claiming to be so busy, he handled all of the budget season work himself, negotiated with the merchants that came to sell equipment and commodities, exploited his position as city guard to obtain as much information as possible, and so on. Otto was still behaving just like a merchant.

"Come again...? He's being a merchant, at the gate? Despite being a guard?"

“Yes. In particular, Otto is the spitting image of a merchant when he negotiates with the merchants that come to sell goods at the gate and squeezes out as much of a bargain as possible. He has the sinister, conniving smile of a merchant on his face each day as a matter of course.”

“Ahaha, he looks like a merchant to you? I see, then it must be so. Mmm... I feel that your words are just the emotional support I needed.” Corinna’s cream-colored hair got silkier as I wiped it with the cloth, and increased in luster like a shining pearl as I diligently ran the comb through it. I thought the same thing when I was washing Lutz’s blonde hair, but seriously, I was jealous.

“If you can, please try to use a wooden comb. The wood will absorb the liquid and help make your hair look more lustrous.”

“Very well. And... gracious, this is even prettier than I imagined.” Corinna let out an awed murmur as she touched her own hair.

“Your hair has a pretty color to begin with, and you seem to have been taking good care of it on your own, so the silkiness came out even easier than normal. All you have to do is repeat this process once every five to seven days,” I explained while pointing at the jar, which had some shampoo left within it.

But Corinna just tilted her head in confusion. “You’re gracing me with the leftovers as well? Goodness, I couldn’t just take it unrewarded. Allow me to give you a gift first.”

“It’s fine. Otto’s giving me nails in return for all this.”

“...Nails? Truly? Is he not selling you short?”

He was, but that was fine with me. I would be getting the nails I needed without telling them how to make the shampoo, and on top of that, I could just ask for more stuff whenever Corinna wanted more shampoo.

“Ahem. Myne, my clothes have gotten a little wet and I wish to change. Would you be a dear and wait outside with Otto for a bit?”

I nodded, but when I opened the door to go outside, Otto practically pounced with the look of a starving bear who had finally found food. “Corinna?!”

“My clothes got wet and so I am changing. Otto, do entertain Myne while I’m busy.” Corinna poked her head out of the slightly opened door and spoke with a smile. Her damp hair spilled across her wet clothes, which when combined with her shy tone gave her a strange air of sensuality.

“Forgive me for showing myself like this. I will be changed in no time.” Corinna shut the door to the bedroom immediately once I was in the hall. I glanced at Otto and saw that he was staring at the closed door in a daze. Seeing how in awe he was, I made a little triumphant pose on the inside. Today had undoubtedly ended in my solid victory.

“Eheheh. So, Otto. Didn’t Corinna look super beautiful? Did you fall in love with her all over again? Her cream-colored hair was gleaming like jewels...”

“Ngh! Corinna!”

“Hold on, Otto! She’s in the middle of changing!”

Otto had gulped for air and then charged straight for the door. I hurriedly grabbed onto his arm, but of course, I lacked a fraction of the strength necessary to stop him.

“Otto, do you intend to show Myne my nakedness?” Corinna’s calm warning from beyond the door struck Otto like lightning. He stopped in place. Then, after a brief silence, he turned slowly around and — with a frighteningly composed smile — clasped me on the shoulders.

“Listen, Myne. Would you do me a favor and remember some important errands you have to do?” Translation: I’ve fallen in love with my wife all over again and wish to spend a passionate evening with her, so please leave at once. *I hear you loud and clear, Otto.*

“I might remember something, depending on how many nails I’m given,” I said with a grin, glancing at the bag of nails resting atop the kitchen table. Otto looked back and forth between me and the nails, having a serious internal debate on the matter. It was beyond clear that he was weighing on an internal scale his merchant instinct for maximum profit and his love for his wife.

“If you give me all of them, I might be able to think of an excuse that will convince Dad.” The moment I said that, Otto remembered that he had told Dad he would take care of me. He immediately pushed the whole bag of nails into my hand with a smile. Things had gone just as planned, so I politely took my leave.

...Well, I ended up with a lot more nails than expected, but that was fine. Otto could just focus on having his fun.

With the nail-filled bag in hand, I began the journey home alone. The nails were heavy. Individually they were light, but together the weight really added up. My arms started wobbling after just a bit of walking.

...This isn’t working. I need to rest. My arms hurt. At this rate, I won’t even make it all the way home.

Upon reaching the central plaza’s fountain, I sat down to take a break. I shook my wobbly arms and massaged them. After a bit of that, Lutz walked by in front of me, probably on his way home from somewhere.

“Oh? Lutz? What’re you doing here?”

“Myne?! That’s my line! Why are you here? Wha? Are you alone?!”

My range of activity was generally restrained to the gate and the

forest. I would always take the shortest path to my destination, so I generally didn't pass through the plaza. Lutz, knowing that I never went anywhere on my own and needed someone to watch over me even when going to the forest, was stunned to see me on my lonesome.

"I'm on my way home from Otto's place. He gave me this many nails! They're pretty heavy though, and he lives kinda far away, so I'm taking a break."

"I'll carry'm for you. Why didn't you have him walk you home?" I gave Lutz the bag of nails while he mumbled complaints. The bag that had been heavy enough to hurt my arms seemed to weigh nothing from Lutz's perspective.

As Lutz and I walked home together, we discussed what our days had been like. Lutz had apparently gone to ask people who dealt with wood for a living and so on for advice on what trees would make good paper or tororo. In Japan we would normally use crushed up sunset hibiscuses for washi making, but in this world, the juices of an edible fruit or a shram bug would be the most suitable.

...Y-Yuck. I sure hope we don't need bug juices. Though bugs will probably be the easiest to get year round.

"Now that we have nails, we can make the steamer."

"Yeah? How big's it gonna be? You said you were gonna make it to match one of our pots, but did your mom say you could use a pot?"

We wouldn't need that big of a steamer for the wood at first, but if possible, I wanted one that matched the size of a pot. However, just about every family only had as many pots as they needed for cooking. Mom probably wouldn't lend me a pot no matter what I said.

"...I haven't asked yet. And actually, at one point, she got mad at me for putting what she thought wasn't food into a pot." If dried fish was enough to make Mom mad, I couldn't imagine that she would lend a pot to me for steaming and boiling wood.

"Then we're screwed, huh? What're we gonna do? I can't make a pot on my own." Pots were expensive. Very expensive. They were the kind of thing you used for a lifetime, repairing them as they broke. Kids like us couldn't get our hands on a pot easily, and making one involved dealing with metal, which was too difficult.

"...We can start with the suketa instead. That won't be impossible once we settle on the size."

"Haaah. Yeah, guess we gotta start with what we can."

Summons from Benno

Lutz and I began making the suketa together while gathering in the forest. Since the frame would be made mostly with wood, it would be relatively easy to put together thanks to our nails.

The hardest part was carving pieces of wood to be the same length. Putting the actual frame together wasn't too bad, especially since we weren't making particularly large washi this time. A suketa used for making postcard-sized pieces of washi wouldn't need a suspension to support it, for instance. I figured it would be wise to mimic the small one I had made in class once.

I drew the frame and wrote what we needed to build it on my slate to show Lutz, and he started cutting the wood while looking at it.

"Ummm, it needs to end up fitting together like this, so you need to cut the wood perfectly straight. Though we can save that for last and make corrections at the end. Well... do you think you can do it?"

"This is a bigger pain than I thought it'd be. Perfectly straight, huh...?" Lutz carved two long frames, envisioning a rectangle with an inner surface area about as large as a postcard. Once the frames for the upper keta and lower keta were ready, he attached a fixed board to them so that the upper keta wouldn't move when we were swishing around the water inside to spread the pulp. Subsequently, he put a grip on the upper keta for grasping purposes.

"You did it! Lutz, it looks great!"

"This is good enough?"

"Yeah! What we do is slide a screen between the upper and lower ketas, hold them by this grip, and shake them to get the fibers all spread out and flat. We're almost there."

Lutz questioned my "almost," so I shook the keta a bit and pointed to the open crack between them. "Ideally there won't be a crack here when the upper and lower ketas are pushed together. The frame will be done once you shave them down such that they fit together perfectly."

"Perfectly?! No way, I can't do that without my dad's tools or something..."

"...Do you think he'll lend them to you?"

"Dunno..." Apparently, Lutz was experiencing some strong kickback from his family over his choice to not follow after his parents into construction and woodworking. He definitely wasn't in a position

to ask for help or to borrow tools.

Lutz's dad was of the opinion that merchants only cared about money, that they were cold-blooded monsters and he wouldn't let his own son become one of them. His mom, Karla, was constantly on his back saying that he had given up on becoming a traveling merchant, so why couldn't he give up once more and become a carpenter? There wasn't much I could do about that, since Lutz himself was determined to follow his own road in life no matter how hard his family fought back. The best I could manage was telling them how hard he was working while teaching them recipes. ...*Once again, I'm pretty useless.*

Even in the worst-case scenario of the keta not working at all, it wouldn't really be a problem. We could just make another one shaped a bit differently. The screen was the problem. We had to make a screen that was like a hundred pieces of bamboo stuck together. We would need a bunch of bamboo, all of similar size, plus string. Not just any string, either; it had to be strong string. We didn't have any string we could use for our own purposes, and turning the bamboo into strips also seemed hard. Although we just needed a screen the size of a postcard, I could easily imagine that it would be quite difficult to make.

"Well, we made the keta today, so let's spend tomorrow carving bamboo and making strips. But I wonder how easy it'll be to make kinda rounded bamboo strips. Maybe square strips will be fine if they're uniform in thickness and length?"

"I dunno. We just gotta try stuff and see what works..."

I wasn't much help since I couldn't use a knife very well yet, but given how many strips we needed, I had to contribute bit by bit. At least we had accomplished our goal of making the keta. That was nice.

"Hey, Myne. Got a second? You come too, Lutz." On our way home, Otto called Lutz and I over at the gate. That was pretty common when he needed my help as an assistant, but he had never called Lutz over with me.

"Me too?"

"Yep. Here, for the both of you. A letter of invitation." Otto handed over a board that looked just like the invitation that Corinna had sent. Thanks to all my studies, I could immediately read the names of the sender and the receivers. It was an invitation from Benno to Lutz and me. I had thought that we wouldn't be seeing each other again until I made paper, and I had no idea why he would send something like that to two kids who weren't even his apprentices yet.

"Tomorrow? That's really soon. He must be in a hurry. I wonder why? He's not going to reject us before we get the samples ready, is he...?" Perhaps an applicant arrived that he had to prioritize above us,

or perhaps he had gleaned from our interview just enough information to make the paper himself. Nothing but bad possibilities ran through my mind.

“No, no! Nothing like that!” Otto shook his hands in a hurry, but I just glared at him. He definitely knew something.

“Mr. Otto, do you know why he sent this?”

“Aaah, well, Benno saw Corinna’s hair and really dug into her with questions. I ended up telling him everything I knew, and uuuh, now he wants to talk to you.”

“Then this is all your fault, Mr. Otto! Why’d you tell him about this?!”

“What’s odd about a husband bragging about how pretty his wife is?”

Wow. Did he go and brag just to get revenge on me for taking all the nails? Well, even if I yell at Otto for that, the letter of invitation is already here. I have to go if I want him to take me on as an apprentice.

“On paper this is just an invitation to lunch, Lutz, so we might end up eating a really fancy meal.”

“Oh man! Yeah! I’m definitely going!” Lutz’s motivation shot up in seconds. Commoners are hungry all the time and would snap up any opportunity to have a fancy meal. Personally speaking, even I was interested in what kind of food rich people ate.

The invitation said to go the Gilberta Company after fourth bell, but I didn’t know where that was. “...Where is the Gilberta Company? We don’t know that place.”

“The Gilberta Company is Benno’s store and the first floor of my place.” Otto lived on the third floor of Corinna’s family home, and that had been arranged because her older brother was worried for his cute little sister. In other words. Corinna was Benno’s little sister, which makes Otto his...

“...You’re his brother-in-law?”

Otto grinned. If they were siblings, it would be fair to assume that everything I told Otto had been leaked to Benno. The will to argue drained from me.

The next day, Lutz and I wore the cleanest clothes we had and headed to Benno’s store. After passing the plaza, our surroundings got increasingly fancy as we walked. Lutz had apparently never walked past the plaza to the inner wall before. He was looking all over the place.

“This is... somethin’ else...”

“Uh huh. It’s the same city but everything’s totally different. I was really surprised too when I first went to Otto’s place.”

“If the city’s this different already, I bet they eat some crazy stuff

over here. I'm pumped," said Lutz with an innocent grin.

I let out a sigh and gave him a warning. "Lutz, be careful about how you eat. He's definitely going to be watching us to see if we have table manners."

"Whaa?! How I eat?! I've never heard about table manners! What're you talking about?!"

To be fair, I didn't know either. Or to be more precise, I didn't know if this world expected similar manners as to what I knew from Japan. I only had one plan for this. "If you just stay calm and mimic how Benno eats, you should be fine."

"...Gaaah. Now I'm nervous."

The two of us, nervous for what awaited us, walked on while holding hands.

We arrived at the Gilberta Company before fourth bell rang. Since the invitation said after fourth bell, we had to kill time near the store.

"What should we do?"

"I think now is a good opportunity to look at the store. We don't know anything about what Benno sells, how many employees he has, or what kind of work his apprentices do."

"...You've got a point."

Gathering info on a potential workplace was just common sense for me, but this world had no internet or anything like that. If you wanted information, you had to dig through rumors or see the truth with your own eyes. There was nothing else you could do.

Under normal circumstances, you would learn information about your workplace through your parents' association with it and through the person potentially hiring you. But Otto and Benno had hid their relationship as in-laws, so I couldn't trust Otto to tell me what I wanted to know. After all, during the meeting, Otto had introduced Benno as "an associate from his time as a traveling merchant." Maybe since they both intended to turn us down, they hadn't explained anything about the job. I didn't want to miss an opportunity to figure this stuff out for myself.

"There's not much for sale here."

"Not as many customers as the shops by the market, either. Is he actually making money?"

"His company is definitely profitable. The store's super clean and all his employees look really sharp. Judging by how professionally they're acting, I can guess that his main customers are rich people, or maybe even nobles."

Even the guard-looking guy standing in front of the store was wearing clothing much more fancy than ours. That was proof his company was involved with vain customers concerned about appearances. Their world was very different from ours. Lutz and I

would have to surpass a lot of hurdles to work there.

Diiing, diiiing...

Fourth bell rang through the city, signaling that it was noon. The store immediately began to close. I would have no idea what to do if it closed completely and there was nobody around. I hurriedly walked up to the guard, who was going inside, and called out to him while holding up the letter of introduction.

“Excuse me! We were invited here for lunch by Benno, but don’t know what to do. Can you help us?”

“Don’t panic so much. He informed me about you two. Wait here until the store’s closed.”

It seemed that at noon the store closed and, excluding one person on noon shift, all the employees left to go eat lunch. I didn’t need to rush at all. I just had to talk to the person on noon shift. It wasn’t long before the store closed. After all the employees left, the person on noon shift guided us deep into the store.

“Sir, your visitors.”

“Yeah. Send them in.”

We were taken to a room that I immediately recognized as one used for holding business discussions. There were chairs and a small table that looked to be designed for interviews. There were shelves on the side wall filled with things I didn’t recognize. Benno was sitting at an administrator’s desk behind which was a shelf crammed with wood boards and pieces of parchment.

...Wait, is that a bookshelf?! Bookshelf probably wasn’t the right word since it didn’t have any books in it, but still, it was a series of shelves packed with things that had words written on them. I started to drift over in its direction, but Benno standing up gave me the strength to dig my heels in and stop in place.

“Hope you two don’t mind me calling you over like this. There’s just something I figured we’d better talk about sooner rather than later.”

“What’s that?”

“Let’s eat first. Talking can come after.” Benno gestured at a chair, which I sat in while staring directly at the first bookshelf-esque thing I had seen in this world. Lutz sat next to me, looking a little nervous.

“It’ll be here soon.” Benno rang the bell on his desk three times. A door on the inside of the room opened and a woman carrying a platter of food walked inside. Apparently the door led to a staircase which connected to the second floor.

“Welcome, Miss Myne and Mister Lutz. I hope you enjoy your meal.”

I thought at first that she was Benno’s wife, but judging by the fact he didn’t introduce her, she was probably just an employee or

maybe a maid.

I said “Thank you” in reply and peered at my tableware. We had only been given a plate, a fork, and a spoon. The cutlery wasn’t that different from what we used at home, and only Benno had a knife. It seemed that the food eaten here was determined entirely by Benno, the master of the house. Salad and meat was piled onto our plates with a bowl of soup placed nearby.

“Go ahead and eat.”

Lutz had been doing his best, but once he started eating, my warnings flew right out of his head. He was practically shoving the food into his face. It seemed that I would need to give him a lesson in manners before he started work as a merchant’s apprentice.

I took my fork and watched Benno carefully, but he didn’t eat any differently from what I was used to. Or so I thought, but for some reason, his attention seemed to be more focused on me than Lutz. *Am I messing up? Maybe I’m eating just a little differently from what he expects, and that’s making him curious?* I thought while working my way through my plate. I was trying my best to avoid being indecent, but it was very possible I was still acting weird.

In any case, the main thing about manners I learned from this meal was that you should indicate that you are full by leaving a little food on your plate. I did my best to clean my plate, figuring it would be rude to do otherwise, and nearly choked when they immediately gave me seconds.

I had been a little excited to eat rich-person food, but in reality, they ate the same things we did — just more of it. The flavor was just about what I was used to. To be honest, the food at my place tasted even better lately, now that we were making proper broth for soup. Lutz seemed pretty satisfied, though. Quantity over quality for him.

“Looks like you two are done, so let’s talk.”

Our talk began with us drinking herb tea and Benno drinking a thick-colored drink that looked but did not smell like coffee.

“First, tell me. Why did you ask Otto for help?” Benno’s angry tone and expression made his frustration clear.

Lutz shrunk down a little and I tilted my head in confusion. “I’m sorry, but I don’t know what you mean. I ask Mr. Otto for help all the time. What exactly are you referring to?”

“I hear from Otto that you got nails through him. You even traded the liquid that makes hair silky for it, yeah?”

“Yes, I did. Is there a problem with that? Otto was the only person I knew who could get me nails, so I thought that was my only option.” I didn’t understand why Benno would be mad at me for negotiating with Otto. Maybe it was a mistake to hand over the shampoo like that.

Benno, seeing that both of us were totally confused, let out a

heavy sigh. "From the perspective of a merchant, you two should have asked me for help first. That's just common sense."

"We should have asked you, Mr. Benno?"

He gave a firm nod, which meant that it probably was common sense for him, but I personally didn't agree.

"Why is that, though? We're not your apprentices or anything yet. If making paper is your test for us, I thought it would be wrong for us to ask you for help."

"Wrong. If you make the paper, you'll become my apprentices and the paper will be sold in my store. Thus, you should come to me for help first and foremost. Not Otto."

Although we were not his apprentices yet, the fact that he had promised to hire us under certain conditions meant that we should have been thinking of him as our boss already. I had been thinking of the paper-making as a test for us to finish on our own, but in reality, it was our first job for him. In which case, what we had done was the equivalent to asking a person from another company for help instead of our boss. That was basically a slap in the face for him.

"I'm sorry. I understand what we did wrong. What we did was like, well, a slap to your face that could have hurt your reputation. We'll be more careful from now on."

Benno nodded several times to my apology and straightened up. "Alright. Now, let's talk business. In return for that liquid that makes hair silky, I will provide the materials you need to make paper. How about it?"

"Wasn't making paper kind of like a test for us, though? Won't providing the materials spoil that?" I had thought that he was testing us specifically on whether we could prepare everything ourselves. It'd be a lot easier to make paper with Benno providing all the materials, but I didn't know if that's what he really wanted.

"If you can't do anything without tools, it won't be a good test of what you can do. And in any case, there's not a workplace out there that expects its apprentices to do their jobs without help. That said, you don't officially work for me yet and I'm not going to help you for free. Loans require collateral, but I'm guessing you two don't have anything that'd work as collateral."

Naturally, children living in poverty like Lutz and I had nothing that would work as collateral. "You can't return information once it's given, though, so I don't think collateral is relevant here," I said.

"That's why I'm not loaning you money, I'm spending it. I'll buy the information on how to make the liquid. In return, I'll prepare everything you need to make paper. Not a bad deal, right?"

"I do think it's a fair deal."

Requesting the construction of certain tools and ordering certain

materials ran the risk of revealing the paper-making process to him, but Lutz and I couldn't even scrounge up a pot on our own. We needed any help we could get.

"What do you think, Lutz?" I said to my friend, who had been sitting silently next to me. We were making the paper together, so I figured this deal was something we should decide on together, but Lutz lowered his eyes a bit and shook his head.

"...Thinking's your job, ain't it? Whatever you wanna do is fine with me, Myne." Lutz was on board too. My job was now to negotiate the best possible terms for us. If Benno would provide the raw materials for us in addition to the tools, then we could focus entirely on making paper.

"Does 'everything you need' just mean tools, or does it include raw materials as well?"

"It does. You're gonna be testing out different types of wood, yeah? I've already heard that Lutz was asking around lumber yards about types of wood."

Wow. The information network of a merchant sure was scary. It didn't take any time at all for news of a kid wandering around gathering information to reach his ears.

"How long will this assistance last?"

"Until your baptism. I can't take you on as apprentices until then. For now, our dealings will take the shape of me buying the things you ask of me. You will earn what's left after handling and material fees are subtracted. Once you two have been baptized, I'll sell paper here, and ten percent of the net profit from it will be added to your wages."

That wouldn't be a problem. We would bring the paper we make here and sell it. The handling fee wouldn't be a problem since we would still be profiting. However, I felt a little uneasy about what would follow our baptism. I appreciated that the net profits would be added to our wages, but what if he fired us? If he stopped paying us wages, then there was the chance that he would stop sharing the profit as well.

I felt that there was a tall, thick wall standing between Benno and I, reflecting the difference in our life experiences — one rich, one poor. Lutz and I had no guarantee that Benno wouldn't cut us off once he was making enormous profits from the paper.

"I would rather have the right to make paper than increased wages. Please make it so that only Lutz has the right to sell paper."

"...What are you getting at?"

"I don't want to be kicked to the street the moment you have paper for yourself. To me, insurance that you won't cut us off is more important than potential profits."

Benno stroked his chin in thought, eyes gleaming sharply. "Well, I

can see where you're coming from. Looking out for yourself is important. Your childish reasoning, however, is full of holes."

"Ngh... I'm trying to learn." Given how little I knew about how this world worked, no matter how hard I racked my brains, my childlike ignorance would hold me back.

"So. You just want the rights to sell paper? You won't push for ownership of the hair liquid?"

"That's right. I won't ask for any control over the (simple all-in-one shampoo). You can sell it as you wish."

I wasn't concerned with the rights of a simple product to sell. Paper, on the other hand, was something I wanted to spread across the world, and I wanted to ensure that Lutz would have a job as a merchant apprentice no matter how hard his parents fought back.

"Fair enough. I'll give you full ownership rights for the paper. But the paper will be sold in my store. I won't give you the right to determine what price it's sold for. I also won't increase your wages. Deal?"

"That's okay with me. This is just insurance, after all."

If I could ensure that we had a place to work for money, I was happy. There would be plenty of time to focus on profit later. It wasn't hard to think of tons of things we could sell for money if given the resources to make them: the hair stick Benno was so interested in, my recipes, other products relating to beauty, and so on. There was no need to get too worked up over the shampoo in particular.

"Then we're done here. I have business at a noble's villa this afternoon. I'll be back in the evening. While I'm gone, write down the supply orders for what you need. Write everything you need to make paper."

I was happy that things were proceeding so quickly, but I hadn't learned how to write supply orders yet. "...I don't know how to write those."

"I'll leave someone here to teach you. If you finish before the afternoon, I'll reward you with some nice information."

"Nice information?"

"There's a certain form of contract that you use when you really want to protect your own interests that is generally only used for nobles and for situations that involve immense profit. I would bet neither of you have ever seen it before. They're not used at the markets. I'll be guaranteeing your right to the paper in a way no oral agreement could ever manage. You're welcome."

It was true that I had wanted a signed contract over an oral agreement, but I hadn't expected Benno to suggest it himself. "...Wouldn't it be more convenient for you if this were just an oral agreement, Mr. Benno?"

Benno shook his head and grinned. “This contract’s also gonna guarantee my ownership of the (simple all-in-one shampoo). I don’t want you two butting in once the profit starts rolling in. You get full ownership of one thing, but you absolutely and completely lose ownership of another thing.”

“Thank you very much.” We had only met twice and it was clear that neither of us fully trusted the other yet. A signed contract would be for both of our benefits.

As his employees began returning from lunch, Benno instructed one of them to be our instructor. It was a man dressed so much like a butler that I got the urge to call him Sebastian.

“Mark, this is Myne and Lutz. Teach them how to write supply orders for me. Keep an eye on them until I’m back.”

“As you wish, sir.”

Benno prepared to leave, giving out orders to various other employees as well. He spun around right before exiting the door and spoke to Mark.

“Oh, right. Mark. Get the contract magic ready before I return.”

...Um, did he just say contract magic? That’s what it sounded like. Wha? Wait, has this been a fantasy world all along?

Contract Magic

Mark, after having the female employee clean up our table, brought in a tray covered with stuff. The word “platter” would be more fitting since he looked so much like a butler, but since it was like a flat circle carved out of wood, the tool was unfortunately less dignified than the carrier.

In any case, he lined the stuff up on the table: flat boards resting on top of one another for some reason, an ink jar, a pen made of some plant that looked like a thin reed, stone slates, slate pens, and some cloth. There was a wide variety of things, and once everything was placed onto the table with perfect alignment, Mark looked up.

“Now then. I will teach you how to write supply orders,” he said, then looked at both of us for a second. “Can you write, Lutz?”

“...The only thing I can write is my name.” It seemed that the lessons I had given Lutz while making clay tablets had stuck in his head. However, he nonetheless lowered his eyes uncomfortably, knowing that a supply order would require more writing than just his name.

Mark gave a nod and placed a stone slate in front of Lutz. “You can write your own name? I had heard you were not the son of a merchant, so consider me surprised. There will be no issue with the contract. However, all apprentices here learn to read. Let us practice your letters while Myne writes the supply orders.” He must not have expected that Lutz could write his own name. I could guess that his initial plans were to teach Lutz how to do so before Benno returned with the contracts.

Mark wrote five basic letters on the slate and had Lutz start memorizing them. He looked pretty used to teaching kids and helping them learn. Maybe he was in charge of teaching the apprentices. “Myne, do you know how to write?”

“There might be some words I don’t know, but if you teach me them, I can write anything.”

“Then I will teach you how a supply order is written.” Mark placed two boards in front of me. One had nothing written on it and the other was already covered with words. That was probably the example order. It had some words I didn’t know, but I could read about seventy percent of it.

“These are the letters that form a ‘supply order,’” said Mark,

pointing at the letters by the top. He then taught me the format of a supply order. It wasn't that hard once I learned the words to indicate who was ordering, what they wanted, and how much. "Myne, do you know what tools and materials you need?"

"Yes, don't worry." I gave a firm nod and started writing the supply orders, but it was harder than I expected to write on a board. I wasn't used to the pen, either, which made writing harder and unpleasant. The soot pen I had made was much easier to use, if you asked me. Though the letters ended up broken and unreadable if you messed up even a little. "Ngggh, this is a lot harder to use than a stone pen."

"Compared to most of those writing for the first time, I would say you're doing quite well."

With Mark's praise giving me a morale boost, I put my all into writing the orders. I scratched away for a bit. Eventually, he took a look at one of the orders and frowned. "Myne, you have pot written here, but how large of a pot do you want?"

"Ummm... I was thinking a pot about as big as the second-biggest pot at my home."

Mark's brows furrowed deeper. It was written on his face that my explanation was incomprehensible. *Well... That makes sense. He doesn't know how big the pots we own are. But I don't know what units of measurement are used here. If I can't use centimeters, how can I describe length objectively?*

"Hey, Lutz. How big of a pot can you carry if it's full of water?"

"Huh? Errr, about this big." Lutz made a circle with his arms.

Leaving it to a kid native to this world was the right idea, heheh.

Asking my helpful partner Lutz for help was the right idea, as Mark immediately took out a tape measure-looking thing and measured Lutz's arm-circle.

"And how deep?"

"Well, Lutz?"

"About this much."

Again, Mark quickly measured Lutz's arms. I myself lacked a readily available tape measure and thus had managed up until now just going with what felt right to me. Nothing had needed precise measurements. But when it came to requesting work from other people, ambiguity just wouldn't get the job done, literally.

I cradled my head and, after a weak groan, held up my hand. "...Mr. Mark, I think you'll have to teach me the units of measurement before I can write these supply orders. Also, there are some things I need to measure at home before we can proceed. May I borrow that measuring device?"

"This tape measure? Of course. I will order a new one, considering

that it is a tool you need.”

We wouldn't be able to make the screen without first measuring the frame that we had already made. Our plan was to make an experimental one about the size of a postcard to test out various types of wood and mixing ratios. Once the results came in and we knew our best recipe, we would make larger paper. Which meant, naturally, that we would need larger tools. A tape measure would be essential.

I borrowed Mark's tape measure and began writing supply orders while he instructed me on units of measurement. We needed a steamer, a pot, wood, ashes, a tub, a suketa, a draining bed, weights, and a flat board. Not to mention the wood and tororo. I wanted to write all of those down so we could get started making paper as soon as possible, but I didn't know how big the steamer needed to be without the pot for reference. Without knowing how big the steamer needed to be, I couldn't order the right size of wood.

I explained to Mark how much wood we needed and how we would be using it so he could help me through figuring out the ideal weight and size for the lumber. However, I didn't know how much ash we would need until I tried making paper for myself. For now I just ordered a single small bag's worth.

It was so hard to describe so much of what I needed that I was quickly getting overwhelmed. “Ngggh. So, about the screen, I would like to take the frame we've already built and see what the craftsman himself has to say.”

“I see. That might be best for this screen you speak of. I cannot understand what it is even after seeing your illustration on the slate.”

I somehow managed to write supply orders for everything except the screen, which Mark gave up on. While my battle with the supply orders continued, Lutz was doing his best to learn letters. Despite being entirely unused to sitting down and writing for extended periods of time, his ability to stay focused was really a very impressive display. The apprentice soldiers at the gate couldn't even compare. People just focused more when they considered their studies important to their life. However, perhaps due to focusing too hard, Lutz's expression had gone totally blank.

“Now then. We seem to have more time on our hands, so let's begin learning math. We can use this calculator to, as you would expect, make calculations.” After a brief rest, Mark began teaching Lutz how to use a calculator. I didn't know how to use the calculators of this world myself, so I was sitting next to him. *These sure are like abacuses from Earth*, I thought while fiddling with it.

Soon I noticed Mark looking at me weirdly. “I thought you already knew how to do math, Myne. The young master said as much.”

“The truth is, I don’t use calculators.”

“How do you do calculations, then?”

“I use my stone slate.”

I pulled out my stone slate and solved math problems suggested by Mark. He was so surprised to see me doing math involving large numbers without a calculator that for some reason, I ended up teaching him how to do written math.

“Mr. Mark, why do you want to learn written math? Can’t you just use your calculator?”

“This will be useful for when I lack a calculator. Not to mention that although I know how to use a calculator, I do not understand how it arrives at the answer it does. This is quite interesting.”

It felt weird seeing Mark end up so interested in a math lecture that could have been aimed at elementary schoolers. The math was basic stuff to me, but not to the people of this world. I was once again reminded of how impressive the Japanese education system really was.

...Maybe I shouldn’t spread stuff like this carelessly. I personally think sharing knowledge is a good thing, but I have no idea what might end up clashing with the common sense of this world. I might have just done something that I really shouldn’t have.

“It is almost time for the young master to return. I will prepare the contract magic.”

“What is contract magic, anyway?” I couldn’t help but feel excited for the first fantasy-esque phrase I was hearing in this world. Up until now this place had been the kind of dirty and inconvenient world I had only ever read about in books. But the whole time, it was actually a fantasy world with stuff like magic.

Maybe I can use magic too! I excitedly waited for an answer, but Mark just gave a small chuckle.

“As you know, mana is a power that only nobles have.”

“...Only nobles?”

“Indeed. I do not see mana much myself, so I’m afraid I cannot tell you much about it.”

My excitement for a fantasy world full of magic shattered in an instant. *Seriously...? A power that only nobles have? I can’t believe that nobles aren’t just keeping all the books to themselves, they’re hogging all the magic too. What jerks.*

“In the first place, contract magic was devised to restrain oppressive nobles. It therefore requires special paper and ink infused with mana. Through them the contract becomes magically binding in such a way that it cannot be nullified or broken without both parties’ full consent.”

“Wow, that sounds really useful.” A magically binding contract

that couldn't be broken sounded perfect when dealing with individuals more powerful than yourself.

"It is useful, but as the paper and ink are as expensive as they are difficult to obtain, contract magic is rarely used unless it involves something expected to bring significant profit."

Apparently, Benno expected very great things from my shampoo. It was true that few things were as profitable as consumable goods used on a daily basis. You had to buy more whenever you ran out, which was inevitable, and I could imagine that few women could go back to having dirty hair after getting shampooed once or twice. Especially rich women who were concerned about their appearances.

The thought that I had undersold myself passed through my mind, but nothing good would come from getting greedy. What we needed was safety, stability, and a foothold for entering the market. There was no reason to be unsatisfied with this agreement.

"I'm back. Sorry to keep you all waiting. Did you finish the supply orders?" said Benno, speed-walking into the room. He seemed to be concerned about having kept us waiting.

"I wrote all the ones that I could right now." I pointed at the stack of boards, and Benno looked at them and murmured "That's a lot" to himself.

Well... there's going to be more when I measure some things, so get ready for that. Please and thank you.

"How's Lutz?" said Benno.

Mark answered after placing a hand on his chest. "As he could already write his own name, I spent this time teaching him various other things. He is quite the fast learner," he said, but despite being praised, Lutz just gave a small nod like he was stuck thinking about something. He was probably pretty tired from studying for half of an entire day. Doing things you weren't familiar with could be very tiring.

"I'm sure Mark explained this, but the contract magic we're about to use involves special paper and ink. Only merchants recognized as dealing with nobles are allowed to use them." Benno took out an ink jar with an odd-looking design. Its contents looked like normal ink at first glance, but apparently it was very different. He spread out the contract paper in front of me as I bubbled with curiosity.

"...You don't mind using something this rare and expensive on us?"

"Don't worry about it. I wouldn't use this if I didn't think it was worth it."

I mean... Say "don't worry about it" all you want, I'm still going to worry.

Benno dipped a pen into the jar and smoothly wrote out the

contents of the contract. The ink was actually blue, not black. I stared at Benno's elegant letters, which indicated at a glance that he was very used to writing.

The contents of the contract were thus: "Myne fully surrenders all rights to the 'simple all-in-one shampoo' to Benno. In return, Benno will bear all costs related to Myne and Lutz's paper-making from the date of signing until their baptism. Myne will have the right to decide who will be making the paper, but Lutz has the right to sell the paper. However, neither of them have the right to decide how to price the paper, nor will they receive a percentage of the profits earned from paper."

I read the contract from top to bottom very carefully. The noble cause of ensuring the contract was written as agreed upon gave me the opportunity to fill my lungs with the smell of ink. *Aaaah... I really want to make paper fast so I can get to making books.*

"Myne. There a problem or something?" asked Benno, confused. I shot back to my senses. Benno was shooting me a suspicious look and Lutz an exasperated one. I got the feeling that Lutz noticed how I had just been enraptured by the smell of ink.

"Bwuh?! It's fine! The contract has our exact agreement written on it, there's no problems at all."

"...I'm okay with it too," said Lutz.

Benno nodded at him and dipped the pen in ink again, then signed his name at the bottom of the contract. He then held out the pen with a flourish and I took it from him after a subtle glance at Lutz.

I stroked the contract parchment — which was much softer than the paper I knew — to fully appreciate its tantalizing texture before readying the pen. I dipped it smoothly into the jar to cover its tip with fresh ink and carefully wrote my name beneath Benno's, feeling the scratchy tip run along the paper. Unlike the boards I had written the supply orders on, parchment was very easy to write on. *Mhm. Paper is definitely superior to boards here.*

"Here, Lutz."

Lutz, whose lips were squeezed tight with nervousness, took the pen, dipped it in the jar, and wrote his own name. His poor handwriting confirmed his lack of experience, but he managed to write his name properly without any errors.

"Good. Next step," said Benno before suddenly brandishing a knife and pricking his own finger.

"Gyaaah?! Mr. Benno?!" As Lutz and I recoiled with surprise, Benno rubbed the swelling blood with another finger and pressed it against his signature like stamping a blood seal. The blue ink absorbed the red blood and turned black.



“Your turn.”

...No thanks! This magic's just scary!

Benno looked at me, but on pure instinct I shook my head rapidly. Lutz, noticing that the blood dripping from Benno's knife and finger was scaring me, took out his knife with a sigh.

“Stick out your hand, Myne.”

“Eek!” I reflexively held my hands close to me. The idea of cutting myself scared me, but so did the idea of someone else cutting me. It looked like it really hurt.

“You're the one who agreed to this contract, yeah? We gotta do this and no way are you cutting yourself. I'll do it for you, so stick your hand out.”

“O-Okay...” I steeled my resolve and timidly held my hand out with my eyes squeezed tight. Lutz pricked my left pinky. It heated up and tingled with pain as blood dripped out of it.

“Put that blood on your thumb and press it against your signature.”

“Bwuuh... Hyah!” Holding back tears, I put blood on my thumb and stamped my name. The ink turned black, just like the ink of Benno's signature did. While Mark stopped the bleeding and wrapped my finger with cloth, Lutz got right to work cutting his finger and stamping his signature as well. *Um... Why didn't he hesitate?! Isn't he scared?*

The moment Lutz pulled his hand back, the ink on the contract shined, then began to disappear from the paper, leaving holes behind like spots of fire until eventually the entire contract was gone. It all happened before my eyes, but it felt like I was watching a CGI movie. *Woow... Fantasy indeed. I can't believe this really is a fantasy world!*

For a bit I stood there staring at where the contract used to be, stunned, before suddenly coming back to my senses. How would we get personal copies of the contract now? It had burned and disappeared.

“The contract's complete. Breaking the contract will put your lives at risk, so don't even think about pulling anything funny.”

“Our lives?!” I jumped in shock and fear, but Benno just looked down at me with an amused grin.

“Just don't break the contract and you'll be fine. Congratulations, you've got the insurance you wanted.”

“...Thank you very much. We appreciate your assistance.” In the end, we did not receive a copy of the contract.

When we left Benno's store with the contract magic completed, we saw that the day was almost over, as shown by the gently setting

orange sun. Lutz and I began walking together just as we had on the way here, surrounded this time by the evening city and all its peculiarities.

"That took longer than I thought. Let's hurry home." The people around us were hurrying home too, making it feel like everyone was walking faster than normal. I rode the wave of people with Lutz walking by my side.

"A lot sure happened today, huh? You must be tired."

"...Yeah." I still had a lot of supply orders to modify and write, but once all of them were delivered and the materials arrived, we could focus on making paper. Not to mention that the contract magic guaranteed our rights, which protected us against Benno kicking us out of the shop after we delivered the paper. Today took a lot out of me, but it was a fruitful day. "Now all we have to do is make the paper and we'll be in the clear, Lutz."

"...Yup." Lutz was so barely audible that his voice came close to disappearing amid the footsteps of those around us before I could hear it. His curt replies worried me, since normally he went out of his way to walk at my pace and talk.

...Did this tire him out more than the forest? Maybe he hates writing and math now? I looked at Lutz as he walked beside me. His golden hair was lit up by the evening sun and seemed almost red in the light, but that also covered his face in shadows such that I couldn't see his expression.

"Hey, Lutz. What's wrong?" I asked, but received no reply.

Lutz opened his mouth a little as if he wanted to say something, but then shut it tightly. He kept on walking in silence, thinking about something. His pace was fast, probably how fast he walked when not regulating to my pace. I had to jog a little to keep up with him. He was acting so weird that my heart stirred with anxious, worried feelings.

"Wait, Lutz."

He stopped in the plaza and turned to look at me. His lips were squeezed tightly shut and his eyes were serious. He looked me in the eyes with the evening sun lighting half his face.

Once he steeled his resolve, he opened his mouth and a somewhat raspy voice came out. "You... You are Myne, right?"

My throat clenched. It felt as if something had grabbed my heart and briefly stopped all the blood in my body. The stir of the crowd around me faded away and I could hear the sound of rushing blood echoing through my ears.

"If you're Myne... How did you talk to him like that?"

"What?"

"How'd you talk to Benno like that? I couldn't understand half of

what you two were saying. You know so much about things I don't. You can talk to adults on equal footing. And that's... that's not Myne. That's weird."

My blood kept pumping. I swallowed hard, listening to Lutz.

"You're definitely Myne, right? Right?"

The desperation in Lutz's voice forced my dry throat to move. I played dumb and tilted my head in confusion. "That's... Who else could I be but Myne, Lutz?"

"...Sorry. I'm being dumb. It was just... really surprising to see you talk with an adult like that." Lutz forced something like a smile onto his face and started walking.

I'd look weird if I didn't walk too. For a second I watched Lutz's back shrink as he got further away from me, then I started after him. *...I really, really messed up.*

I hadn't interacted with many people from this world. My lack of strength and stamina made me useless to just about everyone. I managed to help Otto at the gate, but to him I was definitely just a kid that was a little better at math than other people, and in any case, other kids didn't see me interacting with him. On top of that, all I had done with Lutz was dig up clay and cut branches. Regardless of my goal, I had basically been doing things that any kid might do.

But today, in order to hold my ground against Benno's calculated merchant conniving, I had put my all into negotiating with him. I had put too much of myself out there. From Lutz's perspective, I had definitely just been a weak little girl that he felt responsible for protecting. A little sister, even. But not anymore.

From now on, we would be interacting with adults a lot more as a matter of necessity. We'd have to give instructions to the craftsmen so they could make our tools, for instance. I would be acting less and less like a child. That said, I had no other choice if I wanted to get my hands on paper.

With each passing day I would get even further from the Myne that Lutz knew. I spent so much time around him that it probably wouldn't be very long before he was dead confident that I wasn't Myne. What would he do if he learned my secret, I wonder? How would he react to learning I was someone else in Myne's body?

On the way home, I couldn't bear to walk next to Lutz, whose face was still shrouded in the evening shadows.

Lutz's Most Important Job

Even after getting home, Lutz's words kept stirring in my head. The fact he said what he did despite struggling so much to do so reflected just how suspicious he was.

...What would happen if he learned I wasn't Myne? He would definitely demand that I give Myne back or otherwise blame me for making her disappear. I could imagine his angry, confused, fearful shouts already.

If he told the truth to my family, I would have nowhere to live. Getting booted from home would be the best-case scenario. If this world had a church that supported witch hunting, I might end up tortured and then murdered by people mistaking me for a demon possessing an innocent girl. I shuddered, imagining the illustrations I had seen of women getting tortured in the witch hunts of the past. ...*I don't want to get hurt. I don't want that scary stuff to happen to me. I'd rather die than be tortured.*

I didn't want to get tortured or driven from my home, but if the heat inside me ate me before then, I could die feeling only the pain of a fever. If I decided to die, I had the power to throw myself into the fiery depths without any interruption whatsoever. If all else failed, I could just kill myself before getting tortured. That sounded pretty extreme, but being eaten alive by the heat would be a lot more pleasant than torture.

That realization calmed me down. I always had a way out. Not to mention that, thinking about it, the only thing that kept me tied to this world when I was on the verge of dying earlier was my promise to Lutz. I escaped the heat after thinking that I hadn't fulfilled my promise to him. I apologized for that and made the meeting happen later, so all things considered, I had no more regrets.

Now that I had met Benno and paper-making was no longer a dream, I wanted to go all the way and make books, but I didn't really have much attachment to this fantasy world itself. If Lutz started avoiding me in disgust after finding out my true identity, which was very possible, my quest to make paper would fail then and there.

That said, it was likely that if given a proper explanation, Lutz would stay quiet until we finished making paper and he was accepted as a merchant apprentice. I could manage until the paper was ready, and I could choose to die at any moment. Framing things that way

made me feel a lot better. It wasn't entirely logical, but it worked for me.

Regardless of what I did, everything relied on Lutz. My only choice was to put my all into making paper and living so that I could die at any moment without regrets.

All that talk of suicide might have sounded cool in a self-sacrificial way, but really, I was feeling anything but cool. I was a bit afraid of seeing Lutz again. And indeed, when morning came the next day, I felt anxious when I met up with him.

"I'm going to the forest today. Gotta get some firewood," said Lutz, which made my eyes gleam with excitement. Today I had to go to Benno's store to write the remaining supply orders and teach him how to make my simple all-in-one shampoo. This was a perfect chance to finish up a lot of things which would make me look suspicious, and thereby stall Lutz finding out about my secret.

"Okay, I'm going to Benno's. I need to write the supply order for the screen and discuss where all the stuff will be delivered."

"...You're going on your own?"

"Uh huh. Is there something wrong with that?" If Lutz wasn't coming with me, I had no choice but to go on my own. And since today would involve negotiating with adults, it was better for me if no one close to me was around.

"...Can you manage that?"

"I'll be fine." I clenched my fist to show strength. Lutz looked like he wanted to say something, but he kept it to himself and just said "Later" before heading to the forest.

I had gone to Benno's store before, twice if you included me visiting Otto's home. Going on my own wouldn't be an issue at all. After filling my usual tote bag with my stone slate, slate pen, and supply order stuff inside, I started walking to Benno's store.

...Okay! I'm gonna finish as much stuff as possible today.

"Good morning. Oh, Mr. Mark. Is Mr. Benno here? I've brought the supply order." I entered Benno's store, which must have been in a busy period due to how many customers were going in and out of it, and rushed up to the first familiar face I saw.

"The young master is presently busy, so I will handle them in his stead," said Mark, holding out his hand. I took the supply order out of my bag and handed it to him. That included the ink and tape measure I had used to write it.

"I would like to directly discuss this order with the craftsmen, as we talked about yesterday. Can we make an appointment for that?"

"Lumber yards tend not to be busy in the morning, so we can go

now if you wish.”

“Would that be okay? The store looks pretty busy right now.” I looked over the employees dealing with the constant stream of customers and Mark gave me a smile that resembled Otto’s dark merchant grin.

“I have not raised these employees to be so weak that they would cry over my absence,” he said flatly.

Um... It sure looks like some of the employees are about to cry.

“Not to mention that, as the young master said himself, you are quite the special customer. He decided that it is best if I personally take care of you when you arrive. Worry not.”

“Ummm... Okay. Thank you.” I left Benno’s store with Mark and began walking. Our destination was the lumber yard by the west gate and the market. It was close to the river, so that made it convenient for lumber yards to be near there since that’s where shipping boats came in.

“I had something I wanted to ask Benno, but since he’s busy, can I ask you instead?” While walking along main street on our way to the plaza, I started talking about what I couldn’t in the store. “I would like to borrow a storage building, or like, a work place to put everything.” We had been told we could order what we needed, but we didn’t have anywhere to put all the stuff.

Judging by how Mark was blinking his dark-green eyes, he must not have expected me to ask about that. “What was your plan before now?”

“We were going to split the tools between our homes and carry them to the well or river whenever we needed to use them, but...” Our initial plan involved using makeshift replacements from what we already had available at home and in the forest. I was going to beg my mom for the pot and ashes, and we were going to cut the trees right in the forest.

Ordering these things saved us from having to do that, but in turn we suddenly had a lot more stuff to take care of, and we needed a place to put things we weren’t using that day. But neither Lutz’s nor my home had a spare room or the leeway to leave unimportant things (unimportant to our families, at least) lying around.

“We only have so much space to put things, and at this rate, it’ll be hard to do our work. Nothing would help us more than a workplace with a roof. I’m asking for help, but I know that it’s probably unreasonable. Or does the contract include things like this?” I said.

“Unbelievable,” Mark murmured, rubbing his temples. “I see you were prepared to push yourselves unreasonably far.”

“We didn’t have any adult allies until now.” There was very little

children could do without the help of an adult. I had earned Benno's help with my shampoo as leverage and I intended to exploit it as much as possible. If I missed this opportunity, I would no doubt be unable to make paper for the rest of my life. Now was the time to play my hand to the fullest, not to meekly hold back and risk everything.

"I see. In that case, I will negotiate in your favor for a storage building."

"Thank you very much. With you at my side, I feel like we've already gotten one." Judging from how they interacted before, Mark was probably Benno's right hand man, his trusted confidant, the fist that executed his orders. If Mark negotiated on our behalf, there was no doubt that we would get our storage building.

"Are there any particular requirements you have for this storage building?"

"Umm, we'll be going to the forest a lot, so I would appreciate one close to the south gate. Other than that, all we need is a place with a roof to put the stuff we order."

"Understood... Ah, we're almost there. That is the lumber yard over there," said Mark, pointing up ahead, but I was too short to see anything. Not even jumping made me tall enough.

I took Mark's hands and sped up my pace. "Let's hurry, then." Then, the moment I started eagerly power walking in the direction of the lumber yard, my knees suddenly gave in and I fell unconscious with a choke.

When I woke up, I was somewhere I didn't recognize. I was in a bed covered with a thick cloth that felt amazing, since it meant no straw was poking into me. It was a simple room that even had clean ceilings, but I didn't recognize it at all.

"...Where am I?" I sat up to look around and saw Corinna, who was sewing nearby. She heard my voice and stopped her sewing to race to my side.

"Dear Myne, have you awoken? I truly thought my heart would stop when my Benno carried you inside saying that you had collapsed without warning. Otto once said that walking to the gate once left you immobile, so we assumed your illness was born of exhaustion and took you to bed for rest."

"I-I appreciate your kindness. I'm really sorry about this." *Gyaaah!* I screamed on the inside while groveling on the bed. I had passed out on the way to the lumber yard and gotten carried to Corinna's home by Benno, which suffice to say wasn't a pleasant experience to anyone involved. Mom and Tuuli would probably yell at me if they found out.

...Aaah, I've gotta apologize to Mark. He probably came close to dying of shock after I collapsed mid-conversation right in front of him.

I could tell retrospectively why I had collapsed. First, I was sleep-deprived due to thinking about what Lutz had said. Second, I was pushing myself really hard to finish everything while he was away. On top of that, I was so enthusiastic about how well everything was going that I didn't take the time to think about my own health. There was nobody nearby who understood my health well enough to stop me from pushing myself too far. I had the motivation, but my body just wasn't keeping up. *This body sure is a piece of junk.*

"I shall contact Benno and inform him that you have awoken. I would have liked to contact your family immediately, but it seems that could not be arranged..."

That made sense; nobody was home today. Plus, my family thought I was with Lutz. They definitely didn't expect that I would go to Benno's store on my own and pass right out. The thought of my dad going on a mad rampage with worry was honestly pretty scary, and I didn't even want to imagine how furious Mom would be that I bothered Corinna like this.

"U-Um, Mrs. Corinna. C-Can you keep this a secret from my family?"

"Myne?"

"They thought I would be with Lutz, so if they hear about this, he might get in trouble..." I tried using Lutz as a shield to escape my family's wrath, but Corinna beamed an angelic smile and shot me down.

"I'm afraid not. Those who deserve trouble shall receive it."

"Nooooo..." As I flailed in bed, terrified over the scolding I was now fated to receive, someone contacted Benno. I heard his loud footsteps marching this way moments prior to him flinging the door open and coming inside.

He glared at me with his dark-red eyes and spoke in a low voice. "Girl, you took a year off my life."

"I'm sowwy!" Benno's intense glare was so terrifying that I reflexively began groveling on the bed, slurring my words. I was literally rubbing my face against the bedsheets. "Please forgive me!"

"...The hell are you doing?"

"Groveling is the number one way I know to express sincere regret."

Benno sat on the bed and let out a heavy sigh as he scratched his milk-tea colored hair. "I heard from Otto that you're sickly, but I didn't expect you to be this unhealthy."

"Me neither." I made a big mistake trying to do stuff without Lutz. In my Urano days this would have been no issue, but I couldn't let myself think like that anymore. Myne's so weak and sickly that collapsing after what I did was inevitable.

"This is a problem that motivation alone can't solve," Benno murmured. "Well, alright." He gave me a hard look. "Always come with the boy from now on. No operating alone."

"...Okay." I had no idea that just by going somewhere without Lutz, I ran the risk of passing out. Being able to walk to the forest made me cocky enough to think that the entire city was well within my domain.

"Go home for today. Mark will see you off. You sure worried the hell out of him."

"Bwuh?! I couldn't ask him to do that. I'll apologize to him and then go home on my own!" I said, waving my hands in front of me with my eyes open wide. I couldn't bother Mark more than I already have.

However, Benno pinched my cheek and glared at me, his gaze sharp. "Didn't hear me? I just said no more doing things alone."

"...I heard you. Okay. I'll go home with Mark. Ummm, but since you're here, at least let me tell you how to make the (simple all-in-one shampoo)..." I started to suggest that we do what I set out to accomplish in the first place, but Benno, looking furious, grabbed my head with one of his hands.

"WHAT! IS! WRONG! WITH! YOU!"

"Bwuh?!"

"I said go home!"

"Kyaaah!" I shook in fear as he shouted at me with my head locked in his hand. As I looked up at Benno with reflexive tears brimming in my eyes, an extremely trivial thought arose in the corner of my mind. *I see... This is definitely like being struck by lightning.*

"You are no longer allowed in my store without the boy! If you've got a brain in that head, don't forget that!"

"I'll remember! I won't forget! Ow, ow ow!"

Afterward, I briefly tried to say that I could walk home without being carried, but Mark gently threatened me by saying, "If you don't want my heart to stop, please allow me to carry you," and then sealed the deal by saying "Was your apology mere words?" I had no way to resist that.

I gave up my futile resistance and let Mark carry me home. When my family saw him carrying me and asked him what happened, they got mad, just as expected. I caught a fever during the hours of lectures and ended up bedridden for two days straight.

When my fever went down, I figured it might be best for me to go on a pilgrimage of apologizing to everyone I had bothered. I asked Tuuli what she thought and she told me that while apologizing was important, everyone would prefer it if I just didn't push myself so much.

“And that’s what happened. Please go with me today so everyone doesn’t get mad.” The day after my fever went down, I explained what happened to Lutz and requested that he go to the Gilberta Company with me.

Lutz gave me a look dripping with exasperation and then let out a heavy, heavy sigh. “That’s why I asked if you were going alone, y’know? I knew you’d need help.”

“Th-That’s what all that meant? I just thought you wanted to know if I knew the way there... Lutz?”

“Hahahaha... How the heck did you take it like that? When it comes to you, what else is there to worry about except your health?”

I pursed my lips, pouting as Lutz laughed. He looked at me with a relieved grin. “If you’re gonna pass out in no time on your own, guess I gotta stick with you, huh?”

“Uh huh. Benno said I wasn’t allowed in his store if you’re not with me.”

“Heh... Seriously? He said that?” Lutz was for some reason in a good mood after hearing me report my failures, despite how obviously down I was. That was better than him being depressed, but it kinda ticked me off. *I was so worried about what he said that I couldn’t sleep and was afraid to see him! Why’s he acting so normal?!*

“Alright, Myne. Don’t look so pouty. Let’s go.” Lutz lined up next to me, acting like an older brother, and off we went to the store.

“What did you gather at the forest the other day?”

“Firewood and bamboo. You’re the one who said I should carve the bamboo to show the craftsman what we need, remember?”

“Oh yeah, I did. I forgot all about that.” Indeed, I had totally forgotten that I had planned on making a real life example in case my explanation and illustration wasn’t enough for the craftsman to understand what we wanted.

“C’mon now, get a grip.”

“It’s okay, you’re staying on top of things for me.” There was no way I could remember everything without taking memos. Back in my Urano days, I was a notepad monster. I would write everything I could into my notepad so I could remember. Anything written on a notepad could be safely forgotten, and I became so reliant on that convenience that my memory probably suffered a lot for it.

I told Lutz that we could just remember stuff together, that way we’d overall forget less. He frowned, looking a little close to tearing up. “...To tell the truth, I started to kinda hate myself after seeing that you could write, do math, and deal with adults like that.”

“Wha?”

“You didn’t need me. I started to think I wouldn’t be any help at

all to Benno's store."

Nobody in the store would suggest that a pre-baptism child needed to be useful immediately. Mark valued Lutz quite highly for being able to write his own name and for taking his studies seriously. Lutz just didn't notice that and got depressed after comparing himself to me.

"You don't need to compare yourself to me," I started, trying to console him, but he stopped me with a smile.

"But y'know, now I get it. You collapse in no time. You're smart but careless, you're weak, you're tiny, and thinking about it, there's a ton of things you can't do. Now you can't even go into the store without me."

"So mean, Lutz! I'm useful to people too, sometimes!" He was being so harsh that I started to protest, but for some reason he started laughing so hard he had to clutch his stomach.

After laughing for a bit, Lutz placed a hand on my head and gave it a rub. "I was being a jerk when I asked if you weren't Myne. Sorry."

"...Really. That was just you being mean?" Unbelievable. I had taken what Lutz said extremely seriously, but to him, he was just being mean. I felt the tension draining from my body. "That's a relief. I thought you hated me now..."

"Nah, definitely not. C'mon, let's go." Lutz held out a hand. I took it and we walked off, holding hands. I felt that I had returned to my normal daily life.

"Good morning." We entered the store and found Mark, who took us to Benno's room. Benno glared at me with his sharp eyes, rubbing his temples, then looked at Lutz.

"Boy, your highest priority is now protecting that ridiculous little girl. Think of it as your most important job here that only you can do. Got it? I don't have enough hearts to survive hearing about her collapsing without warning around town."

Lutz, upon hearing Benno's displeased orders, pointed at himself with his eyes sparkling. "...I'm the only one that can protect her?"

"You think anyone else is gonna bother keeping tabs on her? Has anyone else put up with her nonsense?"

"No."

"You think someone in this store is going to?"

"No." Lutz immediately shook his head at each of Benno's questions. It probably wasn't my imagination that there was a proud look in his light-green eyes. *Grr... I wanna squeeze his cheeks for getting all proud on me.*

"Alright, boy. Tell me. Do you think the girl could walk all the way to the south gate today?"

“Yeah, if she walked slowly. And the south gate’s so close to her home that she can go back as soon as she starts feeling bad.”

As always, it felt kinda bad that Lutz and my family knew more about my body than I did. I had intended to build up strength, but I still had next to no stamina. It just doesn’t make sense. Aren’t kids supposed to grow like crazy? I looked down at my body, which in fact had not grown like crazy at all.

Before long, Benno rung the bell on his desk. The door opened and Mark walked in. “You called, sir?”

“She can make it if she walks slowly. Take her there for me.”

“As you wish.”

“Wha? Where are we going? The lumber yard’s by the west gate, right?” I didn’t have any business by the south gate.

Benno gave a light shrug as I blinked in surprise. “Mark told me what you said. I’ll lend you a storage building close to the south gate.”

“Really? Thank you very much!” I jumped up in thanks.

But Benno just said, “It’s not for your sake. It’s for the boy’s. He wouldn’t survive if he had to carry all that stuff around and keep an eye on you.”

“Bwuh?! I can carry stuff too! I’m a lot stronger than I used to be.” I tapped my right arm to show my strength, only to be shot down by all three of them at once.

“Don’t try and do things you can’t. Let the boy handle it.”

“It’s my job to do the heavy lifting, don’t do anything that’ll make you pass out.”

“There is no need for you to carry things yourself. Please focus on managing your health.”

How about no? I can’t let other people do everything for me. I made a promise with Tuuli. I’ll do what I can and I’ll increase the number of things that I can do. If there’s something I can do on my own, I’ll do it, and if there’s something I can’t do, I’ll work hard until it becomes possible. I nodded to myself, steeling my resolve, when Lutz suddenly pinched my cheek and leaned in close, looking into my eyes.

“Myne, I know that look. You’re just pretending to agree, aren’t you? You’re not listening to us at all.”

He... He saw through me?! I rubbed my cheeks while looking up at Lutz in surprise. Benno and Mark shared a look, then nodded.

That day marked the day that Lutz became “Myne’s Manager,” an invaluable role within Benno’s store.

Ordering Tools and Materials

After leaving Benno's place, Mark guided Lutz and me to our storage building by the south gate. The area around the south gate had become something of a craftsman's alley, so there were plenty of warehouses, storage buildings, and so on. Craftsmen used water more than most, so there were more wells than there were in residential districts too.

The storage building Mark guided us to was indeed right next to a well. It wasn't that large, maybe about as big as an especially large closet. The walls still had several shelves nailed into them, indicative of how a craftsman used to use this building to store materials. The floor was clean and although things were a little dusty, I didn't need to go on a cleaning rampage. I looked around and saw that there was already a pot and a bag of something placed in the corner.

"We are operating such that the goods are delivered to our store, then an employee takes them here. We took the pot and ashes here yesterday, as you can see. Today we will be bringing a large tub and weights. Please stay here until they arrive." Mark pointed at the black pot.

I felt gratitude toward Benno well up from the bottom of my heart. Here before us was a pot that Lutz and I never could have gotten on our own.

"Wow, a pot! Lutz, do you think you can carry this pot?"

"Yeah, that should be okay. Especially since I can stick it on my back carrier."

"Okay, let's start measuring. We need to figure out how big the steamer needs to be." I still had the stuff to write supply orders in my tote bag. I took out the tape measure, but Lutz snatched it out of my hands.

"Nothing wrong with measuring, but wait a bit to calm down. You'll get sick again if you get too excited."

"Ngh..."

Mark smiled at our little exchange. "There seems to be no problems with this storage building, so I will return to the store. We are planning to go to the lumber yard tomorrow, so please finish all preparations and measuring ahead of time. I will be leaving the store at about third bell and should arrive at the plaza not long after."

"Okay, I'll keep that in mind. Thank you for everything."

Mark held out a key attached to a chain long enough to wear as a necklace. "I will entrust the key to this storage building to the both of you. Please remember to lock it behind you, and be sure to return the key to the store afterward, even if Lutz must go alone. Understand?"

Lutz took the heavy-looking key and Mark left.

"Lutz, what should we do first?" The storage building had been unused for a bit and thus lacked a box or chair or anything for us to sit on. There was nowhere to rest.

"Guess we better start bringing our stuff in. The frame we've made, the bamboo, the nails..."

"That's a good idea. We need to decide how big of a steamer we want today and write down what size of wood we need, right? I'll check the supply orders I've written to make sure I'm not forgetting any wood we need... Also, I guess we can make the bamboo strip examples here?"

"Yeah, since we'll be needing tools for that."

I wrote what we needed to do today on my slate and rested it against the storage building's wall. With that done, I didn't need to worry about forgetting anything.

Lutz and I went home together and began carrying things to the storage building. I had no idea where we were due to my lack of familiarity with the city, but Lutz was on top of things and walked steadily in the direction of home through thin, winding alleyways. As I wondered just how close it was to my home, we arrived and I learned that the answer was "pretty close." Very nice for someone with as little stamina as me.

"Alright, put your stuff in a basket and bring it down."

"Okay." The only thing we needed from my place was the nails. Lutz's family consisted of carpenters and builders, so if the nails were left at his home it was very likely that someone would accidentally take them or otherwise intentionally steal them. On the other hand, the frame and the bamboo would be mistaken as firewood and burned at my home, so we left them at Lutz's place.

I put the bag of nails and my knife into a basket, then threw in a large rag and broom that caught my eye. There wasn't anything I could sit on in the storage building, so I at least would like to clean the floor and spread out the rag to sit on.

I climbed down the stairs and Lutz was already waiting for me, his basket filled with various wood things. "What's all that stuff, Lutz?"

"Things that Ralph messed up building lately. I was thinking we could use them as chairs."

"Ahaha, and I brought a rag so we could clean a place to sit."

We returned to the storage building, placed the nails on top of a shelf, and lined up the bamboo in the corner. I then took out my tape

measure to measure the size of the pot and decide on what size steamer we needed. I wrote how long the wood would need to be on the stone slate.

“We’re good now, right?”

“Uh huh.”

We needed a lot of wood from the lumber yard. Materials for the steamer, lumber to beat fibers, a long flat board and stand to serve as a draining bed, a relatively thin board to stick the paper onto for drying, bamboo for making strips out of, and the wood to turn into paper. I looked over the supply orders and considered which kind of wood would be best for each thing: hard wood, soft wood, thoroughly dried wood, young wood, etc.

“Guess we just gotta get to work on the bamboo now.”

“Uh huh. Can you shave them down? They need to be smaller and thinner than the mokkan were.”

“Yeah, those were big enough. Dunno how well small strips will go.”

Lutz took the lead and started making strips out of the bamboo. It was possible to do long, sweeping cuts and accomplish a lot really fast, but getting the strips properly thin was hard. I could tell he was struggling with it.

“I’ll try too. Maybe I’ll be good at detailed work like this.” I took out my knife and tried cutting the bamboo thin, but most of it just snapped in half midway through. When I tried going slower to not break them, they ended up covered in bumps and ridges, making them unusable. “This is really hard.”

We had to cut a bunch of bamboo strips to fit the length of the frame. This was work best left to a professional. It would take too much time and skill for us to manage alone.

“I’m here with a delivery!” In the midst of our working, an employee from Benno’s store brought a large tub and weights just heavy enough for Lutz to use on his own. I had the employee place them next to the pot.

“Myne, now that we’ve gotten the delivery, let’s close up for today.” Lutz started packing up his tools after the employee left. But it wasn’t even noon, which meant that I still had plenty of energy left.

“But I’m still feeling fine.”

“Tomorrow’s gonna be real busy. You should rest today. Didn’t you say you were on food duty tonight?”

“Oh, that’s right.” My turn to make food had passed while I was bedridden. Tuuli had taken care of it in my place, and so today I was doing it for her in turn.

“Plus, I gotta do some extra chores today so I have the spare time

to go to the lumber yard tomorrow. So yeah, let's go home already. I'll get the key back to them after walking you home."

I nodded, aware that I was presently dead weight, and started getting my stuff together.

The next day, we met up with Mark in the plaza a little after third bell and went to the lumber yard. Benno opened his store a little before second bell, so the time from then to third bell was the busiest for them.

Since Lutz was with us today, we safely reached the lumber yard without me passing out along the way. There were logs stacked in pyramid shapes and leaning against walls in a way that made the whole place look somewhat similar to the lumber yards in Japan. The main difference was that there were no machines here, so the whole yard consisted of extremely muscular macho men walking around, shouting to each other while carrying and chopping the wood themselves. The word "lively" fit this place to a T. It was so lively it was honestly kind of scary.

"Hello, foreman. It has been some time."

"Ahh, Mark, huh? How's that kid Benno doin'?"

"Quite well. As for my business today, these two are looking for wood." Mark greeted the lumber yard's foreman, a bald guy with streaks of gray in his bristly beard.

"This little girl and boy? The heck kinda wood are they lookin' for?" The burly foreman whose muscles contradicted his age looked down at me with surprise and I had to stifle a squeak.

"Um, I want wood to make a steamer..."

"Aaah? Ya want what kinda wood?" He repeated his question, looking confused. I stumbled for words. Lutz and Mark recognized what I meant by steamer, but maybe this foreman didn't. Or maybe I just had to specifically describe the kind of wood I wanted.

"Ummm, I want steamy... rather, I want hard, dry wood that won't change shape from being exposed to steam. What kind of wood is that?"

"Dry and hard wood, huh? Alright, I've got an idea of what ya want." The foreman nodded to himself and listed three names. "Schwalnuss, trocknen, and pedibay sound about right. Which ya want?"

"I can't really make an informed decision here... What do you think, Lutz?" I didn't recognize any of the candidates. Turning to my side, I looked up at my friend.

"Mmm, I'm guessing schwalnuss will be the easiest to work with."

"Then we will order schwalnuss. Have you decided on the size?" said Mark. I nodded in reply and took out the supply order from my

tote bag, then had Mark look over it to make sure there were no mistakes. "Everything seems to be in order. Foreman, please cut the schwalnuss to these specifications and bring them to our store."

The foreman took the supply order and, after running his eyes over it, handed the board to a young macho man walking nearby with a curt "Ya got work to do."

"Um, I would also like a thick board of wood that likewise won't change shape when wet, plus a stand to put it on."

"We sell wood, but we don't make stuff out of it. If ya want a stand, go to a furniture place or make it yourself. Want more schwalnuss for it?" I gave a firm nod and handed over the supply order for the thick board of wood. He gave a snort while looking it over. I then handed him yet another one. "Sure are buyin' a lot, huh?"

"I still have more, too. I would like two kinda thin boards that are fine getting wet..."

"How thin? Even the hardest wood'll get all bendy if it ain't thick enough," said the foreman.

I searched my memories. I envisioned a board with paper stuck on it, then slapped my hands together. I took out my stone slate and started to scratch a drawing onto it. "Ummm, I would like it to be just thick enough that it won't bend with supports like this holding it up. We need it to be light so Lutz can carry it, since I definitely won't be able to."

"Ha. Anyone who can't carry that much wood is a failure of man." There was no point comparing Lutz to this extremely muscular foreman. I turned to look at Lutz, a little worried, but his face scrunched up before I could say anything.

"I'm a real man, it'll be fine." Lutz was acting tough and would probably suffer for it later, but it would probably hurt his manly pride if I said anything, so I kept quiet.

"I also want hard rectangular lumber, shaped kind of like a club or a laundry stick. It needs to be small and light enough for Lutz to carry around and swing."

"Clubs and laundry sticks are a lot different, lassie. What're you gonna be hitting?" I had just said things used to hit other things, but now that he mentioned it, a club used as a weapon would definitely be different from the laundry stick that Mom used to hit her clothes.

"Wood fibers. We're going to boil wood until it's soft, then hit it until the fibers are fluffy like cotton."

"What for?"

"That's a secret." I made an X with my fingers over my mouth, to which the foreman snorted.

"The weight and hardness balance is real important. Gotta ask,

what kinda block are you gonna be hitting it on? Stone? Wood? That'll change everything."

I felt the blood drain from my face. I had completely forgotten that we needed a block for hitting the wood on. "...I-I didn't think about that. R-Right, I need a block for hitting things! Can I ask for a block and club together as a set? I-I'll write the supply order right now!"

"If you're gonna order'm as a set, you can just add it to this one. Girl, you can write?"

"Yes?" With my head full of my unexpected mistake, I immediately took out the ink, pen, and measure from my tote bag and started adding a description for the block beneath the club. "Foreman, is this okay?"

"Yeah. Is that all?"

"No, I would also like wood with... lengthy, strong fibers? If possible, I would like the fibers to be sticky, such that I can get a lot of fibers that stick together easily. I've heard that trees about one year old are good for this. After two years, their fibers harden and get more knotty, which isn't good for what I want. I would like soft, young wood."

I gave a description of wood that would be good for paper-making, but the foreman didn't have the best reaction. He stroked his beard while furrowing his brows. "We don't deal with young wood like that, 'cause it's not that useful." Apparently, lumber yards didn't deal with one-year-old trees unless they were specially ordered.

"If there's any wood that fits those conditions, would you tell me the species of tree? I don't know which trees are good for what I want, so my plan is to experiment with various kinds. Would you order some if I settle on one type?"

"All I can say is, it depends on how much. Too little and it won't be worth it for us."

"I understand. Lutz, do you know the names of trees around here and where they can be found? I'm sure they'll all look the same to me." It seemed that we were stuck with finding the best wood to make paper on our own. After making our prototypes and finding which wood was the best, we could move into mass production and order the wood we wanted in bulk.

As a young macho man taught Lutz about how to identify various kinds of wood, I showed the foreman our strips of bamboo and asked a follow-up question. "Oh, also. I want bamboo strips like this. Do you sell bamboo here?"

"Not much, but some." The foreman pointed further inside past the pile of wood. I could see a bit of familiar bamboo inside.

"Could you make strips like these for us?"

"That kinda detailed work is for specialists. Ask a craftsman."

"A craftsman, okay. Thank you very much. Um, that's all I'll be ordering today."

"A'ight. Just gotta deliver it all to Benno's store when it's ready, yeah?" said the foreman, looking at the last supply order.

All the supply orders I had given him were under Benno's name. Since he was funding our paper-making in return for the rights to the simple all-in-one shampoo, he ended up as the one ordering the material on the forms. He told me that it was very important from the perspective of the contract magic that the goods be delivered to his store first, then given to us.

"Yes. Thank you for your assistance." I watched the foreman get back to work. While waiting for Lutz to come back, I checked my bag to make sure I didn't miss any supply orders. I still had the order for the stand, which I had been told to give to a furniture maker, and the order for the bamboo strips, which I had been told to give to a craftsman.

Mmm... What should I do about the stand for putting the draining bed on? I mean, the hitting block is one thing, but I don't think we should go so far as to ask a specialist to make a simple stand for us.

"...Mr. Mark, do you have some spare wooden boxes in your store that could serve as a stand? I feel like it'd be a waste to go to a furniture maker just for something like that."

"Very well. I will prepare the wooden boxes for you. How many do you need?"

"We want to put a board on top of them, so about two of the same size. I would also like two or three extra ones too, if possible. They can be different sizes."

Mark agreed to get the boxes for us, explaining that it would be cheaper than ordering them from a furniture maker. "We can go to a craftsman tomorrow. Will that be all for today?"

"Yes. Thank you very much."

The next day, we went to the forest and gathered firewood. While we were at it, we searched for wood that would be good for paper-making.

Lutz was much more familiar with the different types of trees, so I basically left it all to him. The trees genuinely all looked the same to me. I knew that the bark and texture differed between them, but there were so many different kinds that they all blurred together.

We then went to Benno's store to get the key in order to put what we had gathered into the storage building. Mark greeted us and informed me that he had contacted a craftsman. *Holy cow. Mark's like, super capable. He works so fast.*

He scheduled an appointment with a craftsman for five days after we had gone to the lumber yard. We met up in the plaza past third bell as usual and headed to the craftsman's place. The craftsman specializing in wood was, naturally, located in the craftsman's alley by the south gate.

Unlike the lumber yard foreman, the craftsman was on the thin side. He had the muscles he needed to do his job, but his slight build emphasized that he didn't need any more muscles than that. His long ashen hair was haphazardly bundled behind his back. It was clear that he didn't care how it looked as long as it was out of his way.

"What's the job?" He had the sharp gaze of an intellectual craftsman and I couldn't help but squeeze Mark's shirt as he looked me up and down.

"We would like bamboo strips. When we asked a lumber yard to make them, we were told to go to a craftsman..." I took out a bamboo strip from my tote bag and handed it to the craftsman, who ran his fingers over the bumps and ridges.

"You want them like this?"

"If possible, I would like perfectly flat and straight strips, but..."

"Yeah, if this shoddy thing's the best you could do, you were right to come to me. I'll take the job. Are those the raw materials?" The craftsman pointed out Lutz's basket, which had bamboo poking out of it. Lutz took the pieces of bamboo we had brought to the storage building yesterday and lined them up next to each other.

"Is that all?"

"Um! I would also like you to make this screen. Would that be too much?" I drew the design on my stone slate and explained how to make it using the messed-up strip to emphasize it. Apparently, even my poor explanation was enough for the craftsman to figure out what I wanted.

"It'll be a real pain, but not impossible."

"Really? Wow!"

"But I'll need sturdy string to do it. Bring me sturdy string before ordering this," said the craftsman, waving us off. But we couldn't just leave yet. I had no idea what constituted as sturdy string to him.

"Um, I'm sorry. I'm not sure which kind of string would be sturdy enough for this. Would you show me which we need?"

"If you're willing to go to a thread store now, I can go with you." The craftsman looked surly and unpleasant on the outside, but was surprisingly helpful.

That made me so happy I immediately pumped my fist and said "Let's go!", only to get hit on the head from behind by Lutz. I turned around, holding my head, and saw Lutz glaring at me with his green eyes narrowed with frustration.

“C’mon, Myne. Don’t get ahead of yourself. You’re the one that’s gonna pass out.”

“It seems that Myne wishes for me to carry her today as well.”

“Bwuh?!”

Mark must have clearly remembered that I didn’t like being carried by him, judging by the smile on his face that allowed no debate. I started to steadily back away, but then heard the carpenter speak with an annoyed tone.

“Are we going or not?”

“We are going, of course. Myne already said we would. Come now.” Mark captured me, lifted me up, and then carried me to the thread store. We went much faster since nobody had to match my snail’s pace.

While being surprised on the inside over how little I was bouncing despite being carried, I sighed into Mark’s shoulders. *...I’m trying my best, but I’m still dead weight.*

The thread store was also in the craftsman’s alley, so it wasn’t that far away. But as an adult (mentally speaking), I couldn’t bear to have Mark carry me for longer than strictly necessary. He finally let me down at the store and I stepped inside on my own two legs.

“Woow, there’s so much thread!”

“What’d you expect from a thread store?” replied the craftsman calmly, but still, there was an overwhelming amount of thread here.

In this city, the stands at the market generally only displayed as much stuff as a single person could carry, and the stores by the main street generally kept the majority of their products in warehouses and closed cabinets to prevent theft, leaving only a few out in the open to serve as samples. It was uncommon to see a store with so much stuff readily on display.

“Which of these types of thread would be sturdy enough?” In Japan, we used raw silk to make suketa screens. But I didn’t even know if this world had silk or silkworms at all. It was impossible for me to know which type of thread was strong enough for my purposes.

“Spinne silk’s the strongest. Especially when gathered during the autumn breeding season. Pretty expensive, though.” The craftsman asked with his eyes whether I’d buy it, so I in turn looked at Mark. I wasn’t the one paying here. The ultimate decision rested on Mark, who was borrowing Benno’s wallet.

“Spinne silk is quite fine, but there should be no need to specifically buy silk from autumn.”

“...Yeah, but it’s still pretty expensive either way.”

Spinne string was apparently quite expensive stuff. The craftsman looked back and forth between Mark and me in surprise, having apparently intended to start with the best stuff and work down from

there.

“Spinne silk will be fine. However, I will not forgive failure or complaints. Please finish the product without fail.” Mark took the order for bamboo strips and the screens from me and handed it to the craftsman with a smile.

“...You got it.”

Two screens the size of a postcard, matching our frame. That was the final tool we needed to order. I let out a sigh of relief now that all that was done.

The next day, I waited at the storage building until everything was delivered. Once it was, Lutz and I started making the tools we needed. In the interim we went gathering in the forest, did chores at home to avoid our family's ire, and gathered our raw materials. We needed edile fruit or the juices of a shram bug, but for now we were using edile fruit.

The juices of an edile fruit were sticky, and during winter preparations it was common to soak rags in them for use in blocking gaps in windows. Due to that, their price would soon be rising and fewer of them would be on the market. We planned to switch to shram bugs if we ran out of edile fruit.

Mark and Lutz went to buy edile fruit on their own while I was sick with a fever. Mark said that it was a good opportunity for Lutz to build up experience working without me, which made me wonder if I was butting in a little too much.

In any case, by the time everything arrived and I was healthy enough to start making paper, a month and a half had passed since I had first met Benno and declared that I would make paper for him.

Starting to Make Paper

It was finally time to kick the paper-making into next gear, and I had more than enough motivation. In fact, I was so excited that Lutz had to tell me to calm down.

Today's job was to cut down the types of wood that we had decided on using based on the lumber yard foreman's advice and the information Lutz had gathered. Once we had our wood, we needed to boil it by the river, soak it in water, then peel off the outer black bark while still in the forest. We would bring the peeled bark back to our storage building and dry it.

We were just making postcard sized pieces of paper here, so we didn't need that much in the way of raw materials. Excluding firewood, which we needed a lot of to keep the water boiling for hours at a time as was necessary. Thankfully, since we were working in the forest, it wouldn't be too hard to get as much as we needed, and we could just go get more if we came close to running out. The one problem was that Lutz needed to carry the pot and steamer to the forest and back, which wouldn't be easy.

Thus, we began today early in the morning, going straight to borrow the storage building's key so as to get the pot and steamer. We would be working in the storage building after getting back from the forest, too, so we went ahead and told Mark that we'd be keeping the key for a while. We were completely ready, but things took an unexpected turn.

"Are you okay, Lutz?"

"...Yeah," replied Lutz, but he didn't look okay at all with both the steamer and pot tied to the basket on his back. He looked like he was about to be squished flat at any moment.

The root of our failure was simple. When purchasing both the pot and the steamer, we had made sure to aim for a weight that Lutz could carry. And indeed, at both points, Lutz picked it up and said he would be fine carrying it. But we had never considered how heavy they would be when tied together on the basket to be carried all at once.

"Should I carry the steamer?"

"It's too heavy for you." If it was too much for Lutz, it was definitely too much for me. All I could do was give him emotional support while taking care not to overexert myself on the walk to the

forest.

Just like always, Lutz and I began our journey to the forest with a large group of children.

“What’s that, Lutz?”

“What’re you gonna do in the forest?”

The children, having never seen a steamer before, were curious about the stuff in Lutz’s basket.

“We’re gonna make something with this pot and steamer.” The basket must have been enormously heavy. Lutz’s answer was short and simple, which made him sound angry, but the intrigued children kept on asking him stuff.

“Huh? What’re you gonna make? Something cool?”

“...No. This is part of a test for me to become an apprentice. Try not to get in our way.”

“Oh, okay. Got it. Good luck, Lutz.”

I’d thought the storm of questions would never end, but once the kids learned that Lutz’s apprenticeship was on the line here, they immediately gave him space. I asked Lutz why that was later, and apparently, despite most jobs being decided by the introduction of one’s parents, more popular workplaces tended to be swamped with applicants. Sometimes in situations like that the parents would turn to another option, but otherwise the applicants were given a test to determine who would get the apprenticeships.

It was an unspoken, but firm agreement between children that they wouldn’t interfere with those apprenticeship tests. That ran the risk of their own test getting messed with in revenge, and it would be harder for them to find a job themselves if rumors of them interfering with tests spread. *Hm... Neat, neat. I guess every society like this will have popular workplaces that people fight to get into and try to improve their odds with.*

We saw Otto at the gate and he wished us luck. He must have seen the stuff on Lutz’s back and guessed that we were starting our paper-making.

“Uh huh, we’ll do our best. Oh, Dad. Bye bye.”

Dad had been a little jealous lately due to me and Lutz spending so much time together. When I waved him goodbye, he waved back with an expression that was a mixture of a grimace and a grin. It was an expression that made it clear he didn’t like how close I was with Lutz and Otto now, but was still happy to see his daughter waving him goodbye.

“Guuuh, I’m so tiiired. That was a lot heavier than I thought.” Lutz placed the steamer and pot down by the river and spun his shoulders in a circle.

“Good work, Lutz. Want to take a break?”

“Nah, you’ll be checking up on the wood a bell after the steaming starts, right? I’ll wait until then,” said Lutz while he piled up stones by the river bank, laying the groundwork for a hearth upon which to rest the pot. I expected nothing less from Lutz; he wasn’t wasting a moment.

In sharp contrast to Lutz’s wealth of experience outside, I had basically spent all of my past life shut up inside. I couldn’t hope to do what he was doing. As always, I was dead weight. The best I could do was pick up some branches lying around and hand them to him.

Lutz put river water in the pot, placed it on the hearth, speedily put the wood where it needed to be, and lit the fire. “I’m gonna go get some more wood. Myne, you rest and keep an eye on the pot, alright?”

“You need to rest more than I do, don’t you?”

“I don’t want you passing out before the paper’s ready, or after it either. You can gather some branches around here but that’s it, don’t move too much. Also, shout if something happens. Alright?”

“...Okay.” Lutz was absolutely correct, so I resigned myself to quietly watching over the pot. That said, it would be a long time before the water got to boiling. It was so boring. For lack of anything else to do, I took a nearby branch and threw it into the fire.

Having run out of branches near the pot, I was spreading out my search further away from it bit by bit when suddenly I found a red pomegranate-looking fruit half-buried in the ground.

“Oh? What’s this? Is it edible? Maybe I can get oil from it.” The majority of things one could find in the forest were useful to one’s daily life. Having spent a year in this world, my way of thinking had naturally been painted by its culture. Never in Japan would I have found something lying on the ground and immediately decided to pick it up to try and get some use out of it.

“I’ll have to ask Lutz what this is.” I used the twig in my hand to dig the red fruit out of the ground. I picked it up, and for some reason it got really hot all at once. ...*Oh no! It’s a weird fantasy fruit!*

Apparently, the red fruit was a brother to those weird ingredients I sometimes had to fight with to make supper. I honestly had no idea what it would do, and thus I had no idea how to deal with it. In a panic, I threw the fruit as hard and as far as I could. Which meant, of course, that it barely flew a couple of meters before plopping onto the ground.

Immediately, the fruit began bouncing around while making loud crackling sounds and spewing red seeds everywhere. I looked around and saw several plants sprouting from the ground around it. I

watched, stunned, as they grew up to my ankles. *Um... What?! What's going on?! What's with these plants?!*

Things were so obviously wrong that I ran away in confusion, screaming. "LUTZ! Lutz! Luuuuutz! Something's happeniing!"

"What's wrong, Myne?!" Lutz, who had apparently been nearby, ran in my direction while pushing aside branches. He looked in the direction I was pointing and, the blood draining from his face, blew his whistle. "It's a trombe!"

"What's that?"

"No time to explain!" said Lutz while swinging his billhook and chopping down the plants. They were already growing to our knees in height and showing no signs of stopping. It was clear that they were dangerous. "Myne, you go wait on the other side of the river, alright?!"

"O-Okay." The situation afforded us no time to talk. I followed Lutz's instructions and ran to the river. Along the way I soon came across the rest of the kids rushing in our direction, having heard Lutz's whistle.

"What's going o — Wait, a trombe?!"

"Cut it down!"

As usual, I was the only one who didn't understand what was going on. The gathered kids all recognized the relentlessly multiplying plant and immediately raced toward it, their billhooks and knives in hand. I sat near the pot and watched the increasing number of kids slice away at the plant. Reason being, I figured that burning the plant would be a lot more effective than cutting it... or at least, that would be my excuse for not running to the other side of the river (in reality, I was completely out of breath after running for less than a minute).

"It looks like it's not growing anymore."

As I spent some time KO'd by the riverbed, the other kids finished chopping up the rapidly growing plant. They were looking around to make sure they didn't miss any of it.

"Looks fine now, but there might be other trombes nearby. Keep an eye out while gathering and blow your whistle if something happens."

The kids dispersed again to get back to gathering and Lutz walked up to me. "I was gonna ask why you didn't go to the other side of the river, but... I'm guessing it was too much for you."

"...It was too much." I was breathing a lot harder than Lutz, despite how he was the one who had just been swinging his billhook non-stop. If someone who didn't know me saw us now, they'd probably think I had been fighting on the frontlines.

"Lutz, what was that?"

“A trombe.” Apparently, trombes were plants that grew extremely fast. If you didn’t chop them down the moment they started to grow, they would suck the nutrients out of the entire surrounding area.

It was possible for a trombe to get so big that it was impossible for normal folk to chop down, in which case the Knights’ Order would need to be summoned to destroy it. ...*Wow, this place has a Knights’ Order. Just what I’d expect from a fantasy world.*

“Still, that was weird,” said Lutz, sitting on a rock by the river and collecting his breath. “It’s too early for trombes to be showing up. Normally they only grow later in autumn.”

“Hmm...”

“That one was growing super fast, too. But the ground around where it was doesn’t look like it’s gone bad or anything...”

“Huh.”

“C’mon, what’s with you? Don’t you think it’s weird?” Lutz glared at me, looking frustrated at my dry responses.

But what did he expect? That was my first time seeing a trombe, so I had no idea what was weird and what was normal. Trombes in general were weird to me, what with the bulbs sprouting everywhere and growing so fast.

“I mean, I’ve never seen one of those before. I don’t know what’s different about it or anything.”

“Oh, right. You only started going to the forest last spring.” Lutz nodded to himself, and at that moment I heard the pot start to boil.

“Lutz, the wood?”

“Should be around... there...” Lutz pointed to where the trombe had appeared, then dropped his head in frustration. The wood he had chopped up while waiting for the water to boil was nowhere to be found, having been lost when he ran to answer my yelling.

“...Hey, Lutz. Want to try making paper out of the trombe? Everyone just left it there so there’s a lot of it, and since you chopped it as soon as it sprouted, the fibers are probably really soft.”

“Good thinking. Cutting more wood right now would be pretty rough.”

I put some of the trombe plant in the steamer and had Lutz put it on top of the pot. All we had to do for a bit was keep feeding the fire so the water would keep boiling. I tossed the branches I had gathered into the fire bit by bit while Lutz kept an eye on it.

“Myne, sorry, but could you watch the fire for a second? I’m gonna go try to find the wood I lost.”

“Mmm, okay.”

Lutz, having recovered a bit from resting, stood up and went to get the wood he had abandoned in his panic. I took a branch in hand and looked at the fire. Over time I had gotten better at managing fires

so they didn't get too big, but I often would take my eyes off it just long enough for it to get out of control. *Haaah... Gas stoves were so convenient. Electric heaters and stuff are basically magic, really. Induction heating, how does it work?*

Lutz resumed his gathering while the trombe boiled. Apparently the forest grew a lot more edible plants once summer ended and autumn began, so when we switched spots at the pot, I went off to gather whatever caught my eye.

"I found lots of stuff, Lutz. How's it all look?"

"Let's see... Crap, Myne! Show me everything! I need to make sure we can bring them back!" Lutz's expression sharpened after he saw what I brought back, and apparently, about a third of the plants were poisonous. "This one's no good. It'll make your limbs tingly and you won't be able to move for three days. This is no good either. It'll make your stomach hurt for two days. This is worse, you'll froth at the mouth and die if you eat it. Myne... If you don't learn these things, you're gonna die of poison before any sickness can get you."

...He's right. If I don't properly learn these plants, both me and my family will die. Since I had no choice but to keep living in this world, I needed to boost up the priority of "distinguish what's poisonous" on my list of things to do. Without a field guide at hand, I needed to learn from the guidance of another. "I'll do my best to learn them, but I'll need you to teach me, then."

"Yeah."

We heard the faint sound of a bell from the direction of the city, so we took off the steamer. There was enough steam to heat up my face, but just looking wasn't enough to tell if the wood had been steamed enough.

"How's it look?"

"I'm not sure, but I'm going to try putting it in the river and peeling the bark off." I dunked the wood into the river and tried peeling the bark while it was still hot. It came right off without breaking apart, easier than I expected. We just might have found some good material.

"This trombe wood might be perfect for making paper."

"Nobody knows where they'll pop up, so there's no telling if we'll always be able to get young trombes before they grow."

"...Aw. Then this definitely won't work." I sighed, thinking back to how suddenly the trombe had appeared. Too bad. It would have been perfect if we could cultivate them somehow.

"Hey, Myne. Is that all we gotta do today?"

"Uh huh. Now we have to wait for this bark to dry."

"...Alright. I'll leave the peeling to you while I clean this pot up." Lutz began washing the pot and steamer in the river so we could

leave. Sitting down by the river and peeling bark was surprisingly fun, so I hummed to myself while peeling away.

It was time to go back to the city, so I put the bark into my basket along with the various things I had gathered. Lutz pumped himself up and lifted up the pot and steamer on his back. He had his gathered stuff, so the way back for him would be even heavier than the way here.

Lutz and I both wobbled back to town, then separated from the others to go to the storage building. He unlocked the door and put the stuff down. "Gaah, so heavy!"

"The stuff you gathered added a lot, huh? I wish I could hold some of it for you..." Unfortunately, carrying my own gathered materials was literally the best I could do. I didn't have a lick of strength to spare.

We sat down on the floor of the storage building. Lutz took out some of the black bark from inside of the pot and waved it in my direction.

"Hey, Myne. How're we supposed to dry this stuff? And where?"

"Huh? Ummm... I wonder." In my mind I had envisioned drying the bark by hanging it from a central pillar like one does rice straw, but we didn't have a stick to use like that. I looked around, searching for something we could use, and then plopped a hand on Lutz's shoulder.

"Lutz, I'm sorry to ask this while you're tired, but could you beat some nails into this shelf with an equal amount of space between each one? It's important for drying the bark."

"...Fine, fine."

I placed the black bark onto the nails that Lutz hammered for me. This would work for now while we didn't have much bark, but when it came time to mass produce the paper, we would need more space for drying. But well, at that point we could just ask Benno for help. We didn't need more space just yet.

"We need to get the bark completely dry. Mold will grow otherwise. Maybe we should bring it to the forest tomorrow and dry it all under the sun?"

"So we're just gonna be drying the bark tomorrow, yeah? Nothing else? Guess I'll be able to do some normal gathering then. That's a big help, there's a lot of stuff I gotta get real soon."

"Uh huh. I know I want to get lots of mushrooms and dry them. They'll make good mushroom broth."

"...Learn which mushrooms are poisonous, first."

The next day, I went to the forest with the black bark, rested them on the corner of my basket, and gathered a lot of mushrooms while it dried under the sun. Incidentally, twenty percent of those mushrooms

were poisonous. ...*I just don't get it. How does this keep happening...*?

Several days under the sun dried the black bark completely. I wasn't sure at what exact point it became *completely* dried, so I intentionally dried it past the point that looked acceptable. Then I took the crackly bark and went to the forest. The next step was to dunk it in the river for over an entire day, so the weather was important.

We went to a part of the river that people generally didn't go to, moved rocks into a circle shape, and put the black bark inside in such a way that it wouldn't get washed away.

"Is that all?"

"...Probably. Let's check again before we go home." My lack of experience made it hard for me to feel confident, but I was pretty sure that this was how you did it. I looked down at my feet in the river. It was a warm day and therefore the river felt fine, but as the seasons advanced onward, entering the river would run the risk of death due to the cold. *Naturally, this world doesn't have rubber boots or gloves.*

"Lutz, I think we should experiment with other types of wood before it gets too cold. We won't be able to go into the river."

"...Good point. It's already pretty cold, too," agreed Lutz, his face scrunched up at the thought of entering the river during frosty weather.

"Let's cut up the wood now and hide it like when we made the clay tablets. If we're going to bring the steamer and pot here tomorrow, you won't want to carry the wood too, right?"

"Yeah."

We searched for wood that looked like it would make good paper and cut it down, organized the wood by type, and hid it all beneath a low-hanging tree. We occasionally checked the black bark while gathering. The bark surrounded by stones amid the water wasn't getting washed away, and was instead swelling up as it absorbed water.

"I was worried about leaving it here, but looks like it's doing fine."

"...Uh huh."

Even after forcing myself to go home, I couldn't help but think constantly about the bark we had left behind. What if a random deluge overflowed the river and washed it away? What if bandits came and stole it, thinking they'd found mysterious treasure? Weird thoughts came to my mind one after another as I stared vacantly at the ceiling.

The next day, my heart was beating like crazy on the way to the forest, but the black bark was right where we left it with no bandits in

sight. “Whew. I’m so glad it’s still here.”

“...So, what now?” Lutz picked up the water-swollen bark and tilted his head.

“We peel off the outer layer of the bark with a knife so that only the inner white bark is left. But first, let’s start steaming the wood from yesterday. We can work with the bark while the wood is getting steamed.”

The stone hearth we made last time was still there, so after some minor fixes, we put the pot and steamer in place. Once that was done, Lutz and I began cutting off the outer layer of the bark on a large, flat stone near the pot.

“We can leave the dried bark on this stone. Let’s try to finish making the white bark while it’s still warm.”

“You got it.”

We placed the black bark on the stone and peeled off the outside black bark, leaving only the white inner bark. It felt like peeling the tendons out of chicken. But the bark wasn’t that strong, so it broke apart mid-slice. This would probably be better with more efficient tools, but this was the best we could manage.

“Hey, Myne. This works, but uh...”

“Mhm. We could really use a cutting board.”

The screeching sound and bone-vibrating sensation of the knife hitting the stone gave me goosebumps that just wouldn’t go away. I really, sincerely wished we had a flat board to cut this bark on. When making that list of stuff we needed, I had written down everything that came to mind, but now that we were actually doing the work, I realized there was a lot I had forgotten about or otherwise didn’t consider. I thought I knew what I was doing, but it was just too complicated. We would need to add to our arsenal bit by bit while working and realizing what we lacked.

While peeling off the bark with tears in my eyes and goosebumps on my skin, I became painfully aware of just how important real-life experience really was.

Painful Mistakes

Today's job was to bring the pot and ashes to the forest and boil some of the white bark for about a bell's time while the black bark from the other wood dried in the sun. Lutz's step was brisker than usual, probably because the pot alone wasn't that heavy for him, even with the ashes we were using today thrown in.

After reaching the riverbed, I hung the black bark on my basket so that the sun would dry it. Meanwhile, Lutz prepared the pot. After placing the water-filled pot on the makeshift stone hearth, he went to go get firewood. "Listen, Myne. Don't leave the pot alone, no matter what."

"I know that already!" The pot and ashes were both very valuable, both monetarily and in the sense we couldn't replace them on our own. We didn't want the white bark to get stolen either, so we absolutely needed someone to keep watch over our stuff, even if that someone was dead weight like me. Lutz, knowing that I had recently been putting more effort into gathering and therefore wandering all over the place, made sure to drive the point home hard. It sucked.

"You say you know that, but I know you'll just wander off the second you see something interesting."

"I won't leave the pot alone until you come back, so hurry and do what you need to do."

When I first came to the forest, I tried setting my basket down and exploring without it since it was so heavy, but Lutz and Tuuli got super mad at me. Unlike Japan, it wasn't safe to set something down and go somewhere you couldn't see it. Thievery was a constant risk. Which was exactly why the kids would carry their baskets on their own backs and only gather what they could carry home themselves.

Lutz ignited the wood he had quickly gathered, and then went off to get more. I placed the black bark on the basket under the sun and watched the pot, while occasionally adjusting the basket as the shadows moved.

"Is it boiling?"

"Uh huh, I think it's about ready." I put the ashes and the white bark into the bubbling water, then realized I needed a stick to stir it. But I didn't have anything like that. ...*Nooo, something else I forgot about.* Depressed at my feeble imagination's inability to predict these

problems, I looked around to see if there was anything I could use.

“Lutz, we need two sticks of about the same length to stir the pot. The bark of normal wood will peel off into the water, so bamboo is preferable. There should be bamboo close by, right?”

“Two bamboo sticks, huh? Alright.” Lutz found some bamboo and cut them on the spot to make two equally long sticks, which I used like cooking chopsticks to stir the pot. *He must have gotten a lot better at dealing with bamboo while struggling to make those strips*, I thought to myself. After a bit of stirring, I heard Lutz mumble something.

“...Myne, you’re stirring with those sticks pretty well.”

“Bwuh?! Ah, uummm, yeah. Pretty good, right?” I gave a fake smile, but a cold sweat was gushing down my back. There was no Eastern food here, and thus nobody used chopsticks. As far as I knew, nobody even owned a pair. There wasn’t a little girl in the world who would casually ask for sticks to stir a pot, and then hold them like chopsticks rather than grip them individually by the ends.

...Oh nooo, Lutz is looking at me weird. It’s just my imagination. I’m imagining things. There’s no way he’s suspicious. No way. I kept stirring the pot while avoiding reality. It’d be more suspicious if I changed how I was holding them just because he said something. My only choice was to charge ahead, but my heart wouldn’t stop pounding.



...Aaah, I'm an idiot, a big dumb idiot! I'm basically asking him to get suspicious! I forced as normal of a smile as possible onto my face and kept stirring the boiling white bark, until eventually I heard the faint ringing of bells. It was time.

I dunked the boiled bark into the river and washed off the ash while letting the sun hit it. That should make the bark whiter. I had no idea if the plants of this world functioned the same way, but I had no choice but to work with what I knew.

"And now we leave this bark here for a full day."

"Mmm. Alright."

We needed to leave the white bark in the river for a full day as well in order for the paper to be as white and pretty as possible. After Lutz washed the pot, we took turns going gathering. I was picking up noticeably fewer poisonous plants than before. Hopefully I could keep up the good pace.

Today our main paper-related duty was taking the white bark home from the forest. We would gather like normal in the forest, then when it was about time to go home, we would take the white bark out of the river. We were bringing buckets from home with us to hold the white bark instead of the pot, but that was all we needed to do.

"We're going to be working in the storage building from now on."

"Alright. Guess we gotta gather as much as we can today, huh?"

I gathered a lot of edible plants (vetted by Lutz), meryls (picked by Lutz), and finally, lots of krans to cook into jam. I tasted the krans several times while gathering them. They were a lot more sour than Japanese fruits, but my diet was so lacking in anything sweet that they tasted delicious.

When the sun rose on the next day, we didn't go to the forest and instead began work in front of the well by the storage building. I had to do the crud-picking and the water-swishing all in one go to "finish" the paper today, since once you got this far you had to go all the way.

Crud-picking was removing knots and broken bits from the white bark's fibers. It could be done while sitting, so I volunteered to do it myself. While I was fiddling away at the fibers, Lutz was peeling the edible fruit, crushing them, and putting water on them to make the tororo.

"Hey, Myne. Is this whatever tororo is supposed to be?"

"...Mmm, probably. It feels sticky so it should be fine, even though I'm not really sure. I'll think about it when I see how sticky the fibers are when I'm mixing them."

After finishing the crud-picking, it was time to beat the fibers.

Lutz took a hard rectangular club made from what looked like evergreen oak and beat the white bark's fibers until they were fluffy like cotton. He just kept swinging, with his hand clutching the handle at the bottom carved by the people from the lumberyard, wrapped in a cloth he brought from home to avoid hurting his hand.

That was Lutz's job. I would just get in the way if I tried helping with my noodle arms. He finished fast since we didn't have many fibers to work with, but things would get a lot more serious when mass production became involved.

Subsequently, we put the loosened fibers into the washtub along with the tororo and started adding water bit by bit, regulating the stickiness. Normally you'd use a rake or something like a comb to stir, but there wasn't much bark here, so I had Lutz make me two more pair of sticks which I stuck into the pot to stir. *Mmm... I'm pretty sure this is what it was like with the milk cartons after I put the starch in.*

As I wasn't a craftsman I couldn't really balance things well on feel alone, but I scraped up as much of my memories as possible and successfully made the fiber water. With that done, it was finally time to make the paper in the suketa. All that time spent making the two-part frame and the screen was building up to this moment.

"Whew. Finally, something I understand."

My memories of making recycled paper from milk cartons in school went as follows: Boil the carton, peel off the shiny part, mix it up, add laundry starch, swish in the suketa, and dry. This was the first time that my experience making paper would be useful for making washi. *...Finally! After so long, it's my time to shine! Thank goodness for experience points!*

"You really know what you're doing?" Lutz, watching me ready the suketa, tilted his head a bit and looked at me with extreme suspicion.

I mean... Sure, I was pretty vague about a lot of things, and once we got going I realized I forgot a lot of things, but all that had to do with my lack of experience. A little peeved at Lutz not trusting me, I puffed out my little girl cheeks and held up my chin. "Yeah! You can trust me! I've done this before."

"...When, and where?" said Lutz sharply, his brows furrowed. His voice made my heart freeze over for a second.

"Ngh?! U-Ummm, th-that's a girl's secret! Don't even think about prying!" *GAAAAAH! I'm so so so dumb! Why would I say that?! Lutz is giving me a super flat stare right now. He's totally looking at me. AAAAH! Did I just throw myself off a cliff here?!*

I covered up my internal screaming with a fake smile and put the murky fiber water into the suketa. My fingers were trembling a little, but I pretended not to notice. Once the water was inside, I started

moving the suketa side to side, up and down.

“Why do you move it like that?”

“Well, moving it like this spreads the pulpy water out, so the paper will end up equally thick throughout. Also, depending on the type of paper and how thick you want it, you can just repeat this for longer.”

“Huh, interesting. You know that cause you’ve done this before?” Lutz’s eyes dug into me and I knew that not the slightest change of expression would escape him. I didn’t know what I could say to avoid the question. All I could do was fall silent or forcefully change the subject.

“U-Um, Lutz, I’m thinking about experimenting with this and seeing how the number of movements impacts the thickness of the paper. What do you think?”

Lutz must have not liked me dodging the question. I could feel his gaze hardening as he looked between me and the suketa, which I was still moving around. *Aaaaaah... I feel like I just climbed the cliff to fall off it again...*

Once the swishing was done, I took the screen out of the frame and moved the filtered paper to the drying bed. “Be sure not to let air get in between the pieces of paper while you’re stacking them on top of each other. Start at the edge and work your way down.”

“I’ll give it a shot.” Lutz took our other screen and put it into the frame, then began swishing water to make paper. We were just making a postcard’s worth of paper, so a couple of bumps was all it took to get it all spread out equally.

Lutz and I took turns swishing the water around, almost silently. I had expected the white bark to be enough for three pieces of paper, but I was way off the mark. We ended up with ten sheets in the end.

“We don’t have a ton of paper right now, but anyway, we leave the day’s paper stacked on the drying bed. The water will naturally drain out after a full day.”

“Then what?”

“We gently press weights on the paper to squeeze more water out. We can just leave the weights on them for another full day. That’ll get rid of all the tororo’s stickiness.”

“Wow. You sure know a lot about this. Oh, right. Didn’t you say you’ve done this before or something?”

...Oof, that look hurts. He’s definitely figured me out. I didn’t just go off the cliff, I leaped off it. I’m so stupid.

However, despite glaring at me and clearly having something on his mind, Lutz didn’t say anything final. I didn’t want to climb up the cliff yet again for another humiliating self-destruction, so I just got to work making paper without saying anything unnecessary. I had

already failed at avoiding the subject, and telling the truth was just too risky. I could guess that he would say something once we finished making paper, but I didn't know how much he had guessed, nor what he would say to me.

I had already thought up a solution for this, so really, this wasn't a problem. I didn't like pain and I didn't want to be afraid. If things got painful or scary, I just had to unleash the heat inside of me and let it swallow me up. Lately it felt like the heat was getting stronger, so it probably wouldn't take that long for it to consume me entirely.

The problem was, unlike last time, I now had a strong attachment to this world. All we had left to do with the paper was let it dry. There was basically nothing that could go wrong, and with paper taken care of, I wanted to at least make books before disappearing.

...I wonder if I can buy time until then. I want to buy that time. I have to postpone my death until I can make a book. With those thoughts in mind and clouds over my heart, I continued working.

The next day, we walked to the forest in almost total silence. I put the black bark into the river and then we went off gathering. We stopped by the storage building to put the weights on, but that was all we had to do. I couldn't help but find myself thinking about what Lutz was feeling. I could tell he was thinking the same about me, judging by his frequent glancing my way.

"Hey..."

"Hm? What's up?" Lutz speaking up made me reflexively shiver. I had thought I was keeping a cool head about things, but my body just wouldn't back my thoughts up.

Trembling, I waited for Lutz to continue, but he just scratched his blonde hair roughly with his mouth opening and shutting.

"...Nevermind."

"O-Oh?" I knew that I was reaping what I had sown, but still, letting this drag on was really hurting me.

The day after that, I remembered to bring a cutting board and we peeled off the outer black bark. Unlike the trombe bark, it was really hard to get off. The fibers ended up all crumbly. That wasn't just me being clumsy, either — Lutz was having the same problem. The trombe's fibers were perfect, but I was questioning whether this other stuff would be usable at all.

"...I guess different woods are easier to work with."

"Yeah, pretty much." The crumbled fibers resembled my relationship with Lutz so much I couldn't help but sigh. "Once this white bark dries, we'll be good for a while."

"Alright. Hey... Eh, scratch that. I'll say it after the paper's done,"

said Lutz before falling silent. I gave a small nod and steeled my resolve.

Lutz had realized I wasn't Myne and was on the verge of accusing me of being a fake. There was no doubt about it. After all, he hadn't called me "Myne" once since the day I self-destructed. Just what would he say once the paper was ready? How would he interrogate me? Would he yell at me? My imagination was unfortunately too vivid when it came to this kind of thing, so the Lutz in my imagination was saying all sorts of cruel, heartless things. My own mind drove spears through my heart, making me hang my head.

...That's just going too far, Lutz! You're being cruel! Imagination or not, I'm going to cry! I really am!

We worked in the storage building the following day. First, Lutz and I took the white bark we made yesterday, hung it from our baskets, and put them outside. Then, we delicately took the pressed paper off the drying bed sheet by sheet and stuck them to a board.

"Normally we'd use a paint brush to gently get the air bubbles out, but I forgot to order one. Whoops, whoops. The paper's small enough that we should be fine, anyway."

"...You forget way too many things." Lutz glared at me, but since I had recently been imagining a non-stop barrage of pure vitriol coming out of his mouth, that wasn't enough to phase me. I shrugged and blew it off.

"You just need to get one ready before we make our second batch. More importantly, once these sheets dry under the sun, we're done. Sunlight should make the paper even whiter."

Lutz took the board outside and placed it against a wall where the sun was shining. He then washed the drying bed by the well and placed it next to the board so it could dry.

The white paper drying beneath a clear blue sky could only be described as beautiful, and imagining that this was the first step toward a future of books made me sigh in satisfaction. "Aaaah, paper. It's actual, real paper. We really made it..."

"Hey..."

"But we're not done yet. The paper needs to dry until evening. Once they're dry, we'll peel them off slowly so they don't rip, and then we'll be done," I said, trying to postpone the paper being done so I could stall my conversation with Lutz as much as possible. He must have figured that out, though, given the frustrated look on his face.

"So it's basically done already, right?"

"...Well, that's not untrue, but..."

"I told you I had something to say once the paper was done, remember?"

It was time for the interrogation. Lutz's green eyes shone with ferocious light, his anger coming to the forefront. I bit my lip and faced him, planting my feet solidly onto the ground so I would stay upright no matter what he said to me.

Lutz's Myne

"Are we going to talk out here? Do you want to go into the storage building?"

"Here is fine."

I thought it would be better for us to have this conversation in private, but Lutz shook his head. "So, what do you want to talk about?" Lutz's green eyes were burning with anger, but he was still calm. He didn't suddenly scream at me. Instead, he spoke in a low voice that made it clear something was boiling deep inside of him.

"...Who are you?"

His first question was a hard one. Who was I, indeed? I still personally considered myself to be Urano Motosu, but no matter how you looked at me, I was Myne. And having spent a year in this world in this body, I wasn't really Urano Motosu anymore. Too much had changed.

Urano was a girl who only ever read books and never had the initiative to do anything herself. She never even left home since her college was only a short distance from her parents' place. She would help if you asked for it, but in general left all the chores to her mother. There was nothing she proactively did on her own.

Basically, she never had the need to go to the forest daily to gather the barest essentials in life to survive. She didn't have to experiment with cooking to enrich her meals as much as possible. She didn't have to make paper in order to read books. Urano just followed her whims and read the books around her, which was nothing like who I had become.

Lutz interpreted my silent struggle to find an answer as me deciding not to answer, so he glared at me and spoke with even more force than before. "You said you know how to make paper like this because you've made it before, right?"

"...Well, I used pretty different methods the last time I made paper."

"Myne couldn't have done that."

My repeated failures to hide the truth had brought Lutz to certainty, and no amount of lying would solve this. I nodded, hiding nothing.

"Myne couldn't know any of this. She barely ever left her house."

I also knew from Myne's memories that she had barely left the

house. Just how hard had I struggled thanks to how little she knew? It was immeasurable and the source of half my problems. Myne knew nothing but the inside of her home, and thus I had no opportunity to learn what was common sense in this world. My own ideals clashing with the world's expectation of me had not been pleasant, and to this day, I failed to be normal on a frequent basis.

"That's true. Myne really didn't know anything about anything."

"Then who are you?! Where'd the real Myne go? Give her back!" Lutz shouted, furious. But for some reason — maybe because he had been much more cruel in my imagination, maybe because I had been preparing for this moment ever since we finished making the paper — I felt surprisingly calm. This was nothing like my panic after self-destruction.

"I can give you back the real Myne... But we should go back to my place first." Lutz must not have expected a compliant answer. His eyes opened wide in shock, then narrowed in suspicion.

"Why's that?"

"Well, it'll be hard for you to carry back a corpse, right? If I leave, I think the only thing I'll leave behind is a corpse. You don't want my family thinking you killed me, do you?"

My family, Benno, and his employees all knew that Lutz and I had spent the day together thanks to us using the storage building. If I passed out in the storage building and died just like that, it was very likely that all the blame would fall on Lutz. And even if it didn't, Lutz would probably feel guilty anyway. I had suggested we go home first for Lutz's benefit, but he looked like I had just dumped cold water on his face.

"Wh-Wh-What the, what the heck are you saying?!" Lutz was shocked and he began floundering with a tense expression. He hadn't expected that Myne wouldn't come back if I disappeared. "Are you saying Myne's gone for good?! She won't ever come back?"

"Uh huh. Probably..." I could only say probably. I knew Myne's memories, but nothing more. As I had never talked to Myne, she had never asked for her body back.

"Just tell me this!" Lutz glared at me sharply. Entirely like a superhero fighting an evil villain. Thinking about it that way made me smile a little. From his perspective, that was definitely how this looked. I was an evil witch who stole a weak little girl's body and Lutz was a superhero trying his best to save her, the girl he considered a little sister of sorts.

"You talked to Otto and Mr. Benno about some kinda heat, right? Are you that heat? Did you eat Myne?!"

I was honestly a little impressed that Lutz had guessed that the heat in my body had eaten Myne. He was right about that part

specifically.

“You’re half right, half wrong. I think that the real Myne was eaten by this heat too. Her final memories were thus: ‘It’s hot, help me, it hurts, I hate this.’ Nothing but misery and pain. But that heat isn’t me, and the heat’s trying to eat me, too.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?! Aren’t you evil?! Didn’t Myne disappear because of you?! Tell me that’s what happened!” Lutz grabbed my shoulders and shook me. He was probably heating up since his expectations were off the mark, but his specific wording — “*Aren’t you evil,*” and “*Didn’t Myne disappear because of you*” — really ticked me off.

“I didn’t come here and take Myne’s body because I wanted to! I died, and when I woke up, I was this kid. If I could have chosen where to go myself, I would have stolen a noble’s body, so I could read books. And I wouldn’t have chosen a weak and sickly body, either. Who would want a body that’s sick with a horrible disease, one that feels like fire is eating you alive?!” The moment I shouted that I didn’t want Myne’s body, a completely stunned look washed over Lutz’s face and he loosened his grip on my shoulders.

“You... You didn’t want to become Myne?”

“Would you? At first I couldn’t even leave my house without getting out of breath and catching a fever. I’ve finally gotten strong enough to reach the forest, but this body takes forever to grow, and even now, I’ll get sick if I let my guard down for a second. I can barely do anything.”

Lutz fell into thought for a bit, then shook his head. His intensity from moments prior vanished and his eyes began wandering, uncertain. “...Is the heat going to eat you too, like it ate Myne?”

“Mhm, I think so. If I stop holding it in for even a second, the heat bursts out and starts eating me alive. It feels kind of like I’m being swallowed up by it, like I’m being broken apart and vanishing... It’s hard to explain.” My explanation must not have been clear enough, as Lutz furrowed his brow and fell into thought. “What I’m saying is, if you don’t like me using Myne’s body and want me to disappear, just say so. I can disappear at any moment.”

Despite having told me to give the real Myne back, Lutz was looking at me with a shocked expression for some reason, which really wasn’t great for me. I wanted a clear answer from him.

“...It would be better for me to disappear, right?” I asked for confirmation, which made Lutz’s eyebrows shoot up.

He yelled at me, angry. “Don’t ask me! Why would you ask me that?! Whaddaya mean you’ll disappear if I tell you to?! That doesn’t make sense!”

“It doesn’t, but if it wasn’t for you, I would have disappeared a

long time ago.” Lutz looked completely baffled, so I talked to him about the time I almost disappeared. “Do you remember the time I collapsed after Mom burned my mokkan?”

“Yeah. Now that you mention it, something like that did happen.” For Lutz, it was just another day, but for me, it was one of the most important days of my life. A grand crossroads of fate.

“When that happened, I didn’t care if the heat ate me. I was completely ready to just disappear. A world without books meant nothing to me, and no matter how hard I worked I couldn’t finish one myself, so I just stopped caring.” I heard Lutz gulp hard. His eyes told me to keep going, so I closed my own and thought back to that day. The heat was swallowing me up and as the faces of my family passed through my mind, Lutz’s face suddenly popped up.

“I was thinking about my family as I was dying, and suddenly your face popped up in the middle of theirs. I didn’t get it. I craned forward to try and see your face, and before I knew it the heat was receding. I woke up. You were actually there, that really surprised me.”

“I don’t get it. You just were surprised ’cause I’m not a part of your family, right? I didn’t help you or nothin’.” Lutz furrowed his brows and sighed. I shook my head.

“I woke up because I was surprised, but don’t you remember how you were going to get bamboo my parents wouldn’t burn? Thinking about that helped me fight back the heat, I think.”

“But your mom still burned that bamboo, didn’t she?”

I nodded. I could still remember the hollow feeling I felt that day after the anger and frustration faded. It was so horrible I could feel the heat inside of me getting stronger just at the thought of it. “I just gave up on everything and the heat exploded just like that. I didn’t even feel like fighting back and would have just let myself die right there... But then I remembered my promise to you.”

“Promise? I don’t remember no promise,” muttered Lutz, looking up a bit to try and remember. He must really have forgotten about it.

“Figures,” I whispered to myself with a smile. To Lutz it had probably just been a way to say “get better” and nothing more. But still, to me, it was what kept me tied to this world.

“The promise to introduce you to Otto. You wanted me to hurry and get better since you had done your part of the deal, remember?”

The moment Lutz heard me say that, he let out an embarrassed groan and grabbed his head as if that was something he really hadn’t wanted to remember. “Th-That was just... I wasn’t trying to make you owe me or anything, I just... gaah, crap!”

“Why did you say it, then?”

“Don’t ask me that! Let it go! Forget about it!”

I wanted to tease Lutz, but I was the one in the middle of an interrogation. I granted his request and let it go, pretending not to notice his embarrassment.

“Mmm, anyway, I remembered the promise and thought I shouldn’t disappear before doing my part of the deal, so I pushed the heat back down. We met up with Otto and Benno after that, which means I fulfilled my promise. Now that we’ve made paper, I’d really like to keep going and make books, but if you really want me to disappear, I will.”

Lutz looked at me with his face scrunched up, conflicted. He looked me up from head to toe, as if saying he won’t let a single lie slip past him. “Since when...?”

“Hmm? What?” I couldn’t hear what Lutz mumbled since he was hanging his head so low. His head shot up and he looked me in the eyes.

“Since when have you been Myne?”

“...When do you think? At what point do you think the Myne you knew disappeared?” I answered his question with a question, but he didn’t get mad. He just glared at the empty air with a serious expression on his face, thinking. He looked at me, let out a quiet mumble, and kicked his feet at the ground.

After some time thinking, he let out a gasp and looked up, pointing at my hair stick. “Since you started wearing that thing?”

I hadn’t expected him to get it exactly right, but it was true that nobody but me used hair sticks here. If I didn’t have such smooth and straight hair that would break free of any hairband, I probably would have used a string instead of a stick like this.

“...That’s right.”

“So it’s been a whole friggin’ year?!” Lutz’s eyes shot open and he yelled so loud spit came out of his mouth. Speaking of which, I had become Myne at the end of last autumn. We were in the middle of autumn now with winter fast approaching.

“Uh huh. I’ve spent most of my time here sick in bed, but it’s been about a year.” About half of my memories here involved passing out and catching fevers, but still, that was better than the original Myne who spent almost every waking moment in bed.

“...Your family hasn’t noticed?”

“Who knows. They’ve noticed I’m different, but I don’t think anyone has realized I’m not actually Myne.” It was hard for me to believe that Tuuli and Mom weren’t at least somewhat suspicious, given how they had been constantly taking care of the old Myne before my arrival. But they hadn’t said anything to me, and I in turn wouldn’t say anything to them. Our lives were going just fine. No need to rock the boat. “Plus, my dad said that he was just happy I was

finally getting healthy.”

“...Alright.” Lutz let out a sigh and turned his back to me, as if to say the conversation was over. He touched the paper stuck to the board and felt that it had begun to dry.

But I had come here expecting to disappear. The conversation ending without a conclusion was too much for me to bear. “Hey, Lutz...”

“...I think this is something for your family to decide, not me.” Lutz interrupted me before I finished. He thought that my family should be the ones to decide if I should disappear. As it stood, that meant nothing would happen.

“So we’re going to stay like this for now?”

“That’s how it is.” I couldn’t tell what Lutz was thinking since he wasn’t looking my way. Did he not care if I kept on living in Myne’s body despite not being her?

“You don’t mind, Lutz?”

“Like I said, it’s not up to me.” Lutz just wouldn’t look at me, so I grabbed his arm. I wanted to ask what Lutz thought of me, the girl who wasn’t Myne. He got so mad talking about this. Would he really be fine with things just staying the same?

“You don’t want me to disappear, Lutz? Even though I’m not the real Myne?”

Lutz’s arm twitched. I thought that Lutz’s arm was trembling in my hand, but in reality, it was just my own hand that was shaking.

“...I don’t.”

“Why?”

After repeated questioning, Lutz finally looked my way. Then he flicked my cheek. “Myne won’t come back even if you leave, right? And if you’ve been her for a whole year, then the Myne I know is mostly just you,” he said, scratching his blonde hair. He then firmly locked eyes with me. His light-green eyes were calm, his rage and seriousness from earlier having completely evaporated. He looked just like he usually did.

Myne had never thought about exercising to build up strength, so she was even weaker than me. In truth, you could count on both hands how many times she had ever met Lutz or Ralph in her entire life.

“...Yeah. I’m fine with you being my Myne.”

Lutz’s statement made something click inside of me. Like something that had been floating suddenly fell into place. It was a small thing that didn’t seem so important on the outside, but to me, the change couldn’t have been more significant.



Completed Paper

“Aaaah, it’s all crumbly and broken...”

“Same for these.”

The prototype paper made from trombes was solid, but the pieces of paper made from other types of wood were varying degrees of bad. Whether it was because the fibers themselves weren’t sticky enough or because the fibers were shorter than we thought, they didn’t wrap around each other very well and most of them ended up falling apart in the drying process.

“Maybe they would have been fine if we put more tororo into it? I wonder.”

“Just gotta keep experimenting.”

For our next batch, we put in a lot of tororo and went for thicker paper so it wouldn’t break apart so easily.

“How about this?”

“Gotta wait for it to dry, but here’s hoping.”

The thick paper with extra tororo was so hard that it broke apart when we tried peeling it off the board. We could only watch, stunned, as the paper crumbled before our eyes.

“That’s no good.”

“Uh huh. It broke, rather than ripped, so it couldn’t really be called paper in the first place.”

Maybe the ratio of fibers and tororo and water was off, or maybe the wood itself wasn’t good for making paper. It was hard to tell. I had read in a book that you could make something like paper out of basically any plant, but it was impossible to say how much my Earth knowledge applied here. Our failures here just made me want to shout **“BUT WHYYYY!”**

“It’s really too bad we can’t just grow trombes ourselves.”

“Don’t even think about it!”

“Maybe it would work if we had trombe seeds?” I thought it wouldn’t be hard to grow trombes if we could find the kind of red fruit I had picked up, but Lutz just shook his head.

“Don’t look for those! You want to destroy the forest?!”

“If we have those seeds, we can just cut them down once they start to grow like before.” Trombes were problematic since we didn’t know when or where they would appear, but if we could find a seed and then have a bunch of people standing at the ready, they wouldn’t

be too hard to handle.

However, Lutz just rubbed his temples and shut me down harder. "Nobody knows when or where trombes grow! They're too dangerous!"

"Oh, okay." I couldn't deny the possibility that a trombe had just coincidentally started growing near where I had thrown the fruit. Lutz was so mad that I gave up on the mysterious multiplying tree.

"...Hurry up and figure out how things work here."

"I'm trying my best, you know." Myne barely had any meaningful memories due to being stuck at home since birth, whereas I had plenty of solid memories from my Urano Motosu days. I couldn't help but rely on them more than Myne's. But lately, after I told him that I had memories of a past life as well, Lutz had started to correct me when he noticed me not understanding something about this world.

"Basically, trombes are dangerous. They suck the energy out of the ground around them when they sprout, and for a while, nothing will grow where they've been. Growing them ourselves won't ever work."

"Bwuh?! They're that dangerous? It didn't look like that happened with the one we saw."

"That's why I said it was weird. Weren't you listening?"

"I just didn't know what trombes were. You need to know what's normal to know what's weird."

Trombes made the best paper, but they apparently only sprouted in the autumn and were extremely dangerous, so cultivation wasn't possible. Wishing for the impossible was pointless. Only thinking about making do with what you did have would bear fruit, so our trial and error experimentation would need to continue.

In order to make mass production of paper possible from trees readily available in the forest, we experimented with ratios, with hitting the fibers harder, with using shram bugs to make tororo instead of edible fruit, and so on, improving the paper bit by bit.

"Looks like volrin wood's the best for this."

"Mhm. I think paper made from volrin wood with a bit of extra tororo made from shram bugs is good enough to be sold as a product."

After experimenting with the three types of soft wood the lumberyard told us about, we learned that volrin trees produced wood which made the thinnest, best paper. Volrin wood had fibers somewhat harder than the other two soft woods, making it harder to beat, but the more we hit it the stickier the fibers got. Once we realized that, we could make relatively good paper by hitting the fibers a lot.

We then experimented with ratios of materials when making the pulpy water and found what should be the best. I wrote the recipe on

my slate and slapped my hands together, knocking off the dust.

“I think we’re good.”

“Yep. Shouldn’t be any problems mass producing this paper.”

Lutz’s expression was bright with joy over having found a good recipe for paper-making. He stroked the completed paper several times.

“But we’ll have to wait until spring for that. It’s hard to get wood right now and the bark will harden as winter comes, not to mention the river getting colder.”

We would be able to make much better paper by waiting for spring to come, whereupon the forest would be filled with soft wood and branches. Plus, to be honest, entering the river to dunk the bark was already getting painful. For Lutz’s sake, I wanted to put it off until the weather warmed up.

“Okay, let’s go ahead and bring the paper we’ve finished to Benno. Over the winter I’ll be going to the gate to help Otto.”

“Yeah. Let’s finish this up before we gotta prepare for winter.”

“Uh huh. I’ll go to the gate tomorrow and ask Otto how to write a thank you letter. Because, I mean, we’ve finally made paper; I want to write a letter on it.”

Lutz nodded at my suggestion while stacking up the heap of today’s failures. “I’ll leave that to you. So, you want to bring these failures home with you, right?”

“Uh huh. We’re bringing the good paper to Benno, but I’m going to make a book out of the messed up paper that we ripped by accident and stuff.”

I had already confirmed with Mark that it wouldn’t be a problem for us to keep our large number of failures. With them, I would be able to start making my first real book.

The next day, I went to the gate for the first time in a long time. As the winter accounting season involved a lot of budget related paperwork, Otto greeted me with a shining smile on his face.

“Heya, Myne. I’ve been waiting for you.” Otto’s smile broadened as he patted the stack of paperwork next to him and gestured me over. I had apparently arrived while he was in the middle of calculating and writing down the total price of purchasing a certain number of a particular type of goods, as written down on wooden cards.

As I helped him work through the paperwork, I asked him about how to write a thank you letter. “Mr. Otto, I would like you to teach me how to write a letter of thanks.”

“A letter of thanks? What, like nobles send each other?”

I almost said that it didn’t have to be the kind nobles use, but stopped. It was possible that in this world, only nobles ever sent letters of thanks. “Um, there are letters of introduction, so I thought

there might be letters of thanks to express gratitude for those introductions... Was I wrong?"

"I know that nobles send letters of thanks to each other, but I don't know any merchants who will bother with them. It'd be a waste to use paper on something that's not a contract."

That made sense. Paper was very expensive and not something you could use frivolously. "How should I express my thanks, then?"

"For merchants, it's normal for you to take something you're selling that the person wants and give it to them for free. Whether a servant delivers the gift or the merchant himself, the idea is you give them a concrete gift, not a letter."

I had assumed that a culture with letters of introduction would have letters of thanks too and planned to write one on the very paper I had made with Benno's help, but in reality, it was normal to give gifts as thanks and not letters.

"I didn't expect that. Um, Mr. Otto. What do you think I should give Mr. Benno? I can't think of anything we have that he would be happy to have." I couldn't imagine a single one of my possessions being something that Benno would want. He felt like the kind of person who owned everything.

Otto shrugged and gave me some advice. "Won't the paper you two made be enough? That's the only product you two have, and if it's worth something, then Benno will be getting a return on his investment. Seems fine to me. If you really want to throw in something extra, how about... information on some kind of new product to sell, or something like that?"

"Okay. Thank you very much, Mr. Otto."

Hm... My options are raising the value of paper, or giving him information on a new product... I think I can make this work.

The next day, I suggested to Lutz that we make special paper to represent our gratitude. "Otto told me that merchants don't send letters of thanks, they give gifts in the form of products the person will want. So I think we should use trombe wood to make some special paper for him. We still have some white trombe bark, right?"

"Yeah. Great paper would be a good gift for him... Wait, what've you got there?" Lutz looked down at the red plants in my hand.

"I found these growing by the well yesterday and squashed them until they were flat and dry like pressed flowers."

"Whaddaya want allegras for?"

"Naturally, I'm going to use them to make the paper special."

Allegras was the name of a plant that looked like a red clover. My idea was to put the allegrases in the drying paper, just like one would put flowers in the pulpy water while making washi. I wanted to make

a message card with allegrases lined up along the sides, first, and then I wanted to make another sheet of paper with the leaves removed from the stems arranged into heart shapes in the middle like you would see in chiyogami, a kind of decorative Japanese paper.

Once we finished the message card, Lutz and I wrote *"We finished this paper thanks to your support, Mr. Benno. Thank you very much."* on it and signed our names.

"This paper looks crazy pretty."

"The allegrases mixed in make it look like a picture's drawn on the paper, doesn't it? So pretty."

"Yeah. What about this piece of paper?"

"I'm gonna make (origami) out of it."

"Gonna make what?" After cutting the chiyogami-esque paper into a square with a knife, I folded it into a wishing crane. I remembered from my Urano days that people in foreign countries liked shurikens the most, but the people of this world probably wouldn't recognize them, and something elaborate like a massive flower would be a waste of paper. A crane, on the other hand, looked elegant and could easily be made from a single sheet of paper. I made the back part spread out like a peacock's tail, so it looked even better than a normal crane.

"So? What do you think? Looks pretty good if you ask me."

"...H-Holy crap. How'd you turn paper into *this*? I have no idea what you just did." Lutz prodded the crane timidly with his fingers. His reverence made me realize something. *Wait... How much is this origami crane worth, from a materials perspective?*

"Actually, Lutz, isn't a paper decoration like, super extravagant here?"

"Aaah, w-well, it's a gift for Benno. It'll be fine."

I had thought that origami would be a nice combination of cheap to make and unusual, but thinking about the price of paper, I had probably just done something very wasteful. *Aaah... Maybe I should tell Benno that he can spread the paper out and still use it, just with some creases?*

"Otto also mentioned that we could give him information on something that would make a good new product."

"That's your thing, Myne." Lutz casually threw the ball in my court. I had a few products in mind, but I wanted to hear Lutz's thoughts on whether they would sell or not.

"...Benno seemed interested in my hair stick when we first met him, so I was thinking maybe I could tell him more about it, but isn't it just a wooden stick?" I pointed at my head and Lutz gave a big nod.

"Yeah. It's just a stick."

"Do you think it'll sell?"

"...They're easy to make at home, so I dunno if anyone would

bother buying one.” I had expected that, unusual or not, it wouldn’t sell, and Lutz had the same thought.

“If you want to sell your hair stick, what about that other kind? The thing you made Tuuli for her baptism.”

“Lutz, you’re a genius! Everyone really loved that hair ornament! I might want to make them for this year’s winter handiwork.” With that, I had gifts to give to Benno. All we had left was setting up a meeting when he had the time.

“Hey, Lutz. Could you ask Mark for Benno’s schedule when you go to give back the key?”

“Yeah, sure.”

On the day Mark mentioned to us, Lutz and I went to his store with the paper we had made together. As complete products we had the trombe paper and the volrin paper, with three versions of each with varying degrees of thickness, which made for a total of six kinds of paper.

On top of that we had the allegras message card and the origami crane. And finally, I had Tuuli’s hairpin in my tote bag to use as the starting point for potential business plans.

“Good morning, Mr. Benno. We finished the paper prototypes and brought them for you to see. They ended up really good thanks to your investment and help.”

“I heard that from Otto, but really, you already finished?”

“Yes. Have a look.” I took the paper out of my tote bag and placed it on Benno’s desk. After looking at the stack with wide eyes for a second, he reached out and picked up a sheet.

“Let’s see here.” After holding it up to the light and getting a feel for the texture, he took out ink. He then cut off a strip near the top and ran his pen across it. “...You can write on it. It’s easier to write on than parchment since it’s so smooth, too. The ink runs a little, but that’s not a critical problem... Hm.”

“Do we pass? Will you take on Lutz as your apprentice?”

Benno, stroking his chin, grinned and reached for the next sheet of paper. “Yeah, that was the deal. How much of this stuff can you make?”

“Mmm, these are just small prototypes, so we’ll need bigger tools if we’re going to shift into mass production. I think this paper is just a little too tiny to be useful. How big is the paper you use the most?” The letters of introduction I saw at the gate varied so much in size that I had no frame of reference for making my own paper. The suketa used to make normal washi were so massive that they would take more strength than I or Lutz had, which would defeat the purpose. Lutz and I needed to make the paper ourselves, and I wanted to, if

possible, mass produce paper of the most commonly used size.

“The paper I use for letters of introduction and contracts are generally this size. There’s no set standard.” Benno took a piece of parchment from his shelf that was somewhere between an A4 and B4 size sheet of paper. Making one would require a suketa of significant size.

“Okay, then we’ll need a new screen and frame about that size. But we won’t start actually making the paper until spring. It’s getting too cold for us to gather the wood we need and such.”

“Just get your tools ready before spring. Ask Mark for help. This paper will make a lot of money, no doubt about it.” Benno accepted our paper and recognized its value. Lutz and I looked at each other and smiled, happy that our labor had finally borne fruit.

“This paper’s especially high quality,” said Benno, touching the paper made from trombe wood. He could tell at a glance that it was higher quality. It was both whiter and smoother.

“That paper was made from trombe wood.”

“Did you say trombe?!” Benno’s jerked his head up, looking stunned.

Lutz and I exchanged glances. Indeed, trombes were apparently a very well known plant famous for being dangerous. I took a step back and left the explanation to Lutz so I wouldn’t say anything weird. Picking up on my intention, Lutz stepped forward and spoke.

“Myne found a growing trombe when we were gathering in the forest by chance and we got this wood from chopping it down with the others. It was really hard to get and who knows where trombes will pop up, so I don’t think we’ll be able to make it very often.”

“Yeah, figures. But trombe wood, huh...?” It was plain as day that Benno was desperately thinking of a way to mass produce trombe paper. He had the expression of a calculating merchant, but trombes were rare enough that he probably didn’t have much hope of coming up with something.

“In all our experiments, trombe wood ended up being the best quality paper, but without materials to make it, we can’t sell it. This other paper is made out of volrin wood. That’s much easier to get, so this paper is more suitable for being sold as a product.”

“Makes sense. Volrin wood’s definitely good for mass production.” Benno nodded to himself. It looked like he had come to a conclusion on all this paper business, so I took out my gifts.

“And, here... This is a letter of thanks we made for you. Mr. Otto told us that you would appreciate us increasing the value of paper, so we made a special kind of decorative paper.”

“A letter of thanks, huh? I’ve sent one to an archnoble before, but I’ve never gotten one myself. Feels like I just went way up in society.”

Benno, grinning and looking pleased, opened up the message card. He then froze, staring at it with slightly widened eyes.

“Um, we put allegrases into the paper while making it. How do you like it?”

“Wha? Allegras is a kind of common weed, isn’t it? But... they look beautiful like this, huh. I’m thinking this paper would be good for noble wives and daughters.” The fact Benno immediately thought of market demographic upon seeing a new product just showed how reliable of a merchant he was. That he expected the paper to interest nobles was tacit confirmation that we had indeed raised the value of the paper.

“Umm, and this is like, a gift for investing in us and helping us come this far. It’s a decoration made from paper. This one is a (wishing crane).”

“Ohoh! This is paper?” I flattened the crane on his desk and Benno picked it up, eyes sparkling. He looked at it from various angles, but really, it was just a decoration and nothing more.

“I realized I had done something very wasteful after making it. It’s just a decoration. But if you spread it out, you can use it as paper again. Creased paper, but still.”

“What’s wrong with decoration? It’ll be a good marketing prop for the paper we’re selling here.” As he put the crane on one of his own shelves, Benno murmured that he would put them on top of the paper shelves, should the operation go that far. It seemed that his shelf would be the crane’s home for some time. To be honest, I hadn’t expected him to like the crane that much. I was truly, truly glad that I had made it for him as a gift.

“I’ll be honest. I didn’t think that you could make paper out of wood. The quality’s a lot better than anything I expected, too. This will make for a fine product. Good work. I’m looking forward to mass production starting in spring.” Benno’s high praise made Lutz and I so happy that we clasped hands and jumped for joy. I thought back to how hard it had been to make all this happen and actually teared up a little.

“We did it, Myne.”

“It’s all because you worked so hard, Lutz.”

Benno watched us celebrate with a wry smile and stacked the paper back onto his desk. “I’ll buy all this paper. You’ll be paid on your way out, just talk to Mark.”

“Really?!” Speaking of which, he had mentioned that we would be paid what’s left after the fee for materials and handling.

...*Wow! It’s my first pocket change!* I started to think about how it might be a good idea to use our remaining white bark to make paper to sell, when suddenly it hit me. I had brought Tuuli’s hairpin to ask

Benno about whether or not it would be a worthwhile product.

“...Also, there’s something I want to discuss with you. Do you think this would sell?” I took the hairpin out and placed it on Benno’s desk. It was a short pin with a bouquet of small blue and yellow flowers attached to it. For some reason, Benno jerked after seeing it and tensed up a little.

“Girl, what is this?”

“A hairpin. It bundles up your hair and looks pretty, too. Like this.” I took Tuuli’s hairpin and stuck it in next to my hair stick. “I made this for my older sister’s baptism, so I can’t sell this one in particular, but I think I might want to make this kind of ornament for my winter handiwork. Do you think they’ll sell?”

Benno, glaring at the hairpin with sharp eyes, spoke in a low voice. “...They will.”

“Okay, I’ll make them then. Which means, well... can I ask you to also fund me making these, so I can sell them to you?”

Benno let out a sigh and looked at me. I was probably just imagining that he looked really tired. “What in the world do you need?”

“String. It doesn’t have to be high-quality string, but I would like string of as many different colors as possible.” Making all the hairpins the same color would be boring, and I was sure everyone would want a hairpin that matched their hair color and such. The more designs and colors the better.

“Just string? What else?”

“I would like a little wood, but since I’m already gathering wood for firewood, that’s not a problem.”

“You’re making these on your own, girl?” Benno gave me a hard glare. Whiiich reminded me that our operation here revolved around me thinking and Lutz making. It would probably be smart to have Lutz help in some way.

“...The plan is for me to make the ornament part and Lutz to make the wood pin part. We’ll be working together, of course. Right, Lutz?”

“Yeah. I’ll make the wood parts.” Lutz squeezed my hand and hurriedly nodded.

Benno gave me a firm look that implied he wanted to say something, but I kept my cool with a fake smile. “Alright, sure. Now that we have that settled, do you two have the time and strength to go somewhere right now?”

“Uh huh.”

“Perfect. We’re going to the Merchants’ Guild.”

“The Merchants’ Guild?!” ...*Oh no, another new phrase. What kind of place is the Guild gonna be?*

The Merchants' Guild

We headed to the Merchants' Guild with Benno carrying me. At first I had been walking on my own, but Benno got so mad at my walking speed that he yelled "You're slow! This is a waste of time," and picked me right up. Along the way he lectured me about the importance of time, giving me no room to protest.

"By the way, Mr. Benno. What is the Merchants' Guild, exactly?" It was very possible that this Merchants' Guild was different from the ones I was familiar with, so I decided to ask for details.

"What, you don't know?"

"I've never been. Do you know about it, Lutz?"

"It's just a place for people who buy and sell stuff, yeah?" I had thrown the ball into Lutz's court in case every kid in the city knew about the Guild, but his reply wasn't anything I couldn't surmise myself from the name alone.

Benno, sighing, gave us an explanation. "...Well, you're not wrong. The Guild's main job is to give permits to those wanting to open stores in the cities, and to punish stores violating the law. You can't open a store without the Merchants' Guild's permission, not even a stand at the market. On top of that, everyone in the business needs to register with the Guild. Anyone doing business unregistered gets punished severely." In other words, it was like a government office dealing with trade. Since they gave permission to open stores and registered merchant apprentices, that probably wasn't too far from the truth.

"The Guild seems like an organization with a lot of political power."

"That's right. It's powerful and greedy. You gotta pay to register an apprentice, you gotta pay more if you want to start a new business, and basically anything you do there will have some kind of fee attached." Perhaps it was a shared trait among all worlds that money was required for doing anything. This was a cruel world for poor people.

"Either way, a kid can become a merchant apprentice after his baptism gets registered there. Everyone working in a store is connected to the buying and selling of products. You two will only be temporarily registered until your baptism, but this is the only way I can sell the paper, hairpins... any products you bring me."

"Does that mean we have to be registered with the Guild for you

to buy our paper?"

"Correct."

I see. Benno was rushing our registration so that he could buy our prototypes. I nodded to myself, but Benno furrowed his brows.

"I'm hoping this goes smoothly, but we're dealing with that insufferable old geezer here. He's not gonna let this happen without butting in."

Well, that's not something I expected to hear. I thought Benno was a higher-up in the Merchants' Guild, but I guess not. Maybe there's a faction war going on?

"Y'see, my store is expanding at a pretty fast rate. The guildmaster wants a piece of the pie and is always trying to snatch as much of my profit as he can. Understand? Keep quiet and don't say anything unnecessary."

"Okay." Lutz and I both replied together. Neither of us had any intention of getting between two skilled merchants battling it out. It'd be like jumping into a pit of angry lions.

"Right. About that hairpin you brought, Myne."

"This one?" I opened my tote bag a bit to show the hair ornament.

Benno nodded and then looked at me with his dark-red shark eyes. "How many days does it take to make one of those?"

"If I have all the materials ready and Lutz makes the wood part for me, and if I'm not feeling sick... Ummm, I can finish the flower part in about a single day, if I work really hard." It would also depend on the number of small flowers, but still, it would generally take me a day's work at my speed. My mom, skilled at sewing as she was, could probably finish one within the span of two bells.

"What about you, Lutz?"

"Shaving the wood and stuff should probably just take a single bell."

"Alright. Good," said Benno, his tone pleased but his eyes still gleaming sharply.

"Why is that good?"

"You'll see." With the grin of a carnivore that had just found its next target, Benno jutted his chin forward. There I saw the Merchants' Guild building.

The Merchants' Guild was a large building constructed in the corner of the central plaza. That alone signified that it was a wealthy organization, but on top of that, every floor of the building was part of the Guild, with no rooms being rented out to anyone.

The front door had an armed guard standing in front of it. After giving Lutz and me a suspicious look, he turned to Benno. "What brings you here today?"

"Getting these two a temporary registration."

The guard opened the door. We went inside and I was stunned to see that it immediately led to a staircase. The stairs were somewhat wide, but I couldn't see any path to the first floor.

"Mr. Benno, what kind of first floor does this building have?"

"Right. The first floor here is used for parking carriages and carts. It'd get in the way of public business if carriages were to line the main street. You'd see them if you went out around back."

We got to the second floor and reached a wide hall. A large number of people were traversing through it, going every which way. It was such a bustling crowd that I actually felt surprised, like wow, this really was a big city with a lot of people.

"We've got no business here. We're taking the inner staircase to the third floor."

The path to the inner staircase was safe for me since Benno was carrying me, but I saw Lutz getting crushed by the crowd of people as he followed behind us.

"Are you okay, Lutz?"

"Yeah, but man... it's like a festival here."

"This is where people apply for stands at the market and where traveling merchants come to get permission to do business. It gets busy like this when the market's coming up. Once it ends, it'll be quiet for a bit."

"Neat."

The inner staircase was blocked by a metal fence with another guard standing in front of it. "Registration card, please."

"All three of us are going up."

"Understood."

Benno took out a metal card and handed it over to the guard, who then held it out toward the gate. Immediately, the gate shone with a white light and then melted into thin air until it was gone.

"Bwuh?! What was that?!"

"It's a magic tool. Lutz, don't let go of my hand. It'll knock you back."

"R-Right." Benno held me up with one arm while taking Lutz's hand with the other before walking up the staircase.

"I thought that only nobles could use magic."

"The executives of organizations like these generally have connections within the nobility. More than a few nobles don't hesitate to give out magic tools if they determine that it'll be a net positive for them."

"I've never seen a gate like that before." I thought the same thing when I signed the magic contract, but apparently this was much more of a fantasy world than I had expected.

Once we finished climbing the stairs, Benno let go of Lutz's hand

and set me onto the floor. White walls stretched into the distance and I could see what looked like a receptionist counter near the other end. As the third floor was for those who already owned stores in the city, there were fewer people and it was a lot quieter than the second floor, which had to deal with anyone wanting to open a stand in the market.

Although the second floor had been dusty and dirty with wood flooring, the third floor had carpet and was kept clean. It had the atmosphere of a place where a decent sum of money was being dedicated to its maintenance and furnishing. A single glance would remind you that we lived in a stratified, status-based society.

“There are conference rooms behind these walls. Neither of you will be seeing the inside of one,” explained Benno, pointing at the white walls while walking to the counter. Lutz and I held hands and followed behind him. The floor’s high-class atmosphere was unlike anything I dealt with in my normal life, and it was making me nervous.

We passed by the conference rooms and reached the counter stretching from wall to wall at the end. There were children working behind it, probably apprentices, reading wooden cards and using calculators to do math.

“Lutz, you’ll really want to learn math and letters over the winter.”

“...Yeah.”

There was a sofa by the counter to relax on, though the area it was in felt more like a reception office than a waiting room.

“Wait, is that a bookshelf?!” I looked around and saw a rack with wooden cards and pieces of parchment lining its shelves. My enthusiasm immediately shot through the roof.

Benno shot me a somewhat confused look. “More or less. It’s a bookshelf with rules for opening stores, simple maps of this region, and scrolls detailing the lineage of nobles. You’re interested in them?”

“Yes, very! Very interested!” I wanted to charge right at the bookshelf, but Lutz squeezed my hand tight and wouldn’t let me go.

Benno grinned at the sight of me losing my cool. “You can look at them after we state our business at the counter. The waiting time’s gonna be long, no doubt about it.”

“Really?! Yaaay!”

“Calm down, Myne. You’re getting too excited.”

Could I be calm after discovering what could be technically classified as simplified books? Simplified books that were within my power to read? No, I could not. I valued Lutz’s advice, but this heart-racing excitement wouldn’t just vanish into thin air.

Or so I thought, until Lutz gave a flat warning that forced me to calm down. “If you get too excited, you’ll pass out before you get to

read anything.”

No... Anything but that!

Benno, who had been watching our exchange with amusement, sensed that a conclusion had been reached and said, “Follow me.”

We walked up to the counter. The receptionist gave a fake business smile upon seeing Benno. “Hello, Mr. Benno. What brings you here today?”

“I want a temporary registration for these two. Myne and Lutz.”

“Temporary registrations? But they are not your children, I imagine?”

“They’re not. But I need them registered. Let’s get this done.”

Apparently, temporary registrations were originally devised as a loophole to allow merchants to let their children work in their store before being baptized, when normally unbaptized kids are not legally allowed to work or be registered with the Guild. Under normal circumstances, no merchant would ever want to involve a non-blood-related child in their business to the extent of getting a temporary registration for them, so Benno was doing something quite out of the ordinary.

The receptionist narrowed her eyes suspiciously, but asked Lutz and I some questions while writing something behind the counter. The questions were what you would expect from any bureaucratic institution: our names, our fathers’ names and where they work, our home addresses, our ages, and so on.

“You’re getting temporary registrations for the son of a carpenter and the daughter of a soldier?” With the questions over, the receptionist looked over Lutz and me with even more suspicion than before. She was very clearly searching for the reason for why he would want to get temporary registrations for us. It wasn’t a very pleasant experience.

“Just finish the registration. You’re wasting our time here.”

“Yes, certainly. Please wait for just a moment.” She pointed at the waiting space. I looked at Benno, holding back the urge to bolt to the bookshelf.

“Mr. Benno, can I look at the bookshelf while we wait?”

“Sure. I’ll answer any questions you got. Just bring the scroll over to me. Lutz, don’t let Myne out of your sight.”

“Got it.”

I walked to the bookshelf with Lutz, who was refusing to let go of my hand. I spread out the parchment and picked up the wooden cards to see what they were. They all had practical usage in mind first and foremost: there were maps, diagrams, records of noble lineages, and what looked like old newspapers giving information about the city and surrounding area.

“Woow, this is a map!” It was a fairly rough map, but it was the first one I had ever seen in this world. I hugged it close to me, not even knowing where we were on it, and walked to the sofa where Benno was sitting. Once there I enthusiastically sat on it like I would a normal sofa, expecting a soft spring cushion, but in reality it was just a piece of cloth spread across a wooden board. The landing hurt my butt. “Owww...”

“That’s what you get for sitting so hard, idiot. I know you’re excited, but try not to embarrass yourself.”

It’s not my fault... They shouldn’t trick me with fake sofas like this. I wouldn’t have sat like that if it were obviously a wooden bench. I let out a little “hmph” and made excuses in my head after Benno looked at me with exasperation, then spread out the map on the cloth-covered wooden board we were sitting on. “Mr. Benno, which city are we in?”

“This one, Ehrenfest. The family name of the area’s lord is used as the name of the city.” I heard the name of my city for the first time. At the same time, I learned the name of its lord. You didn’t have to know the name of a city if you never left it, and everyone just referred to the lord by his title.

I looked at the map and saw that there were farming villages and forests to the south of Ehrenfest, then further down there was a small city. To the west was a large river and a city belonging to the neighboring region. The lord of our region and the lord of that region were apparently friendly, which meant there was a lot of trade between them. The north of the map had a big blank space, since that was where the lord lived in a city of nobles. To the east was a large paved road. Most travelers came from that direction.

“You two might leave the city for business reasons, but all in all it’s not likely that you’ll ever leave what’s on this map.”

After I had Benno teach me the names of several neighboring cities, I put the map back and went back to digging through the bookshelf. The lowest shelf had a book for teaching apprentices numbers and letters. I skimmed through it, thinking it might be good help for studying with Lutz. There were letters I knew and lots of words related to business. I wanted to memorize them.

“Mr. Benno, could I have a stone slate for studying with Lutz...?”

“Sure. I’ll subtract the cost from what I’m paying you today. Study hard.”

“Also, can I ask how literate the average child of a merchant is?”

After our baptism, we would be working with the children of merchants as apprentices. I wanted to at least get as good as them before that happened.

“They can read and write on a basic level. Same for math. They mainly know what products their stores sell. Math-wise, they can

calculate transactions that deal with just coppers and silvers.”

Oh no. I don't know how the currency works here. I know there's small and large copper coins, and small silver coins, but that's it. I don't know the exchange rate or market value or anything.

...Because, I mean, my family only uses copper coins. I've barely ever even seen any currency other than copper coins. Plus, I just deal with numbers at the gate. I've never seen Otto actually using money.

“In my eyes, the thing you two lack the most is knowing how to deal with customers. The other kids have seen their parents working every day. They've got customer service in their bones.” That was impossible for us to compete with. In the past I had always been the receiver of services, never the giver. Lutz likewise had never been given the opportunity to develop a merchant's instincts.

...Oh no, what should we do? Before I could lose myself in thought on the subject, the receptionist called for us from behind the counter. “Mr. Benno, the guildmaster would like to see you.”

“...I knew that geezer would get in my way,” murmured Benno before standing up, just quietly enough for us to hear. The glint in his eyes and the clenched fists by his sides told me that he was preparing for a fight. “Let's go, you two.”

We walked to the counter and the leftmost part of it folded down so that we could go inside. Behind the counter was another staircase. We climbed it and the door at the top opened by itself. Behind it was a relatively small, but comfortable looking room. A fluffy carpet was spread in front of a brightly burning fireplace, and on top of the carpet was a business desk.

Behind the desk sat a kind-looking older man with somewhat broad shoulders that looked about in his fifties. I had expected that the guildmaster would be an old grandpa, but this man looked like he was just slightly past his prime.

The guildmaster gave a warm smile and stood up. “Now then, Benno. I will get right to the point. Why do you want to temporarily register these children, who are not even of your blood? This is quite different from a merchant registering their child so they can look after their stand at the market, as you know.”

In other words, the guildmaster was saying that he knew Lutz and I had in our grasp a product valuable enough for Benno to want to register us now without waiting for our baptism. He had said all that with a warm smile still on his face.

“I can't allow this registration unless you make your intentions clear. There is no precedent in recorded Ehrenfest history for a child unrelated to a merchant being temporarily registered.” The guildmaster stared at Lutz and me with a smile that gave no hints as to his thoughts.

My first impression of him had been that he was a kind man, but that was far from the truth. He was threatening us. If we didn't answer his questions, he wouldn't approve our registration. The guildmaster had complete control of the situation, and out of nervousness, I looked at Benno. He was looking at the guildmaster with a malicious smile that made it clear he was utterly confident that he would succeed.

"In short, you want to know what these children brought me?"

"Yes. Depending on what it is, I might find it better for another location to sell it. Your store is beginning to overstep its bounds."

Again, in other words... We're worth something and he wants the profit for himself. He's not even hiding his intentions here.

"They want to sell it in my store, and so I'm going to. Right, Myne? Lutz?" Benno threatened us with his eyes not to say anything. Lutz and I just nodded hard. Pleased by that, Benno's smile widened and he looked down at me. "Myne, show the guildmaster the prototype of those hairpins you want to start selling."

"...Okay." It seemed that Benno intended to hide the fact that he was dipping his toes into the paper industry. I didn't know why he was hiding that, but he had made it clear I shouldn't say anything unnecessary. I stuck a hand into my tote bag while saying as little as possible, then took out the hairpin and held it out so the guildmaster could see.

And for some reason, the second I did that, the guildmaster paled and his eyes widened.

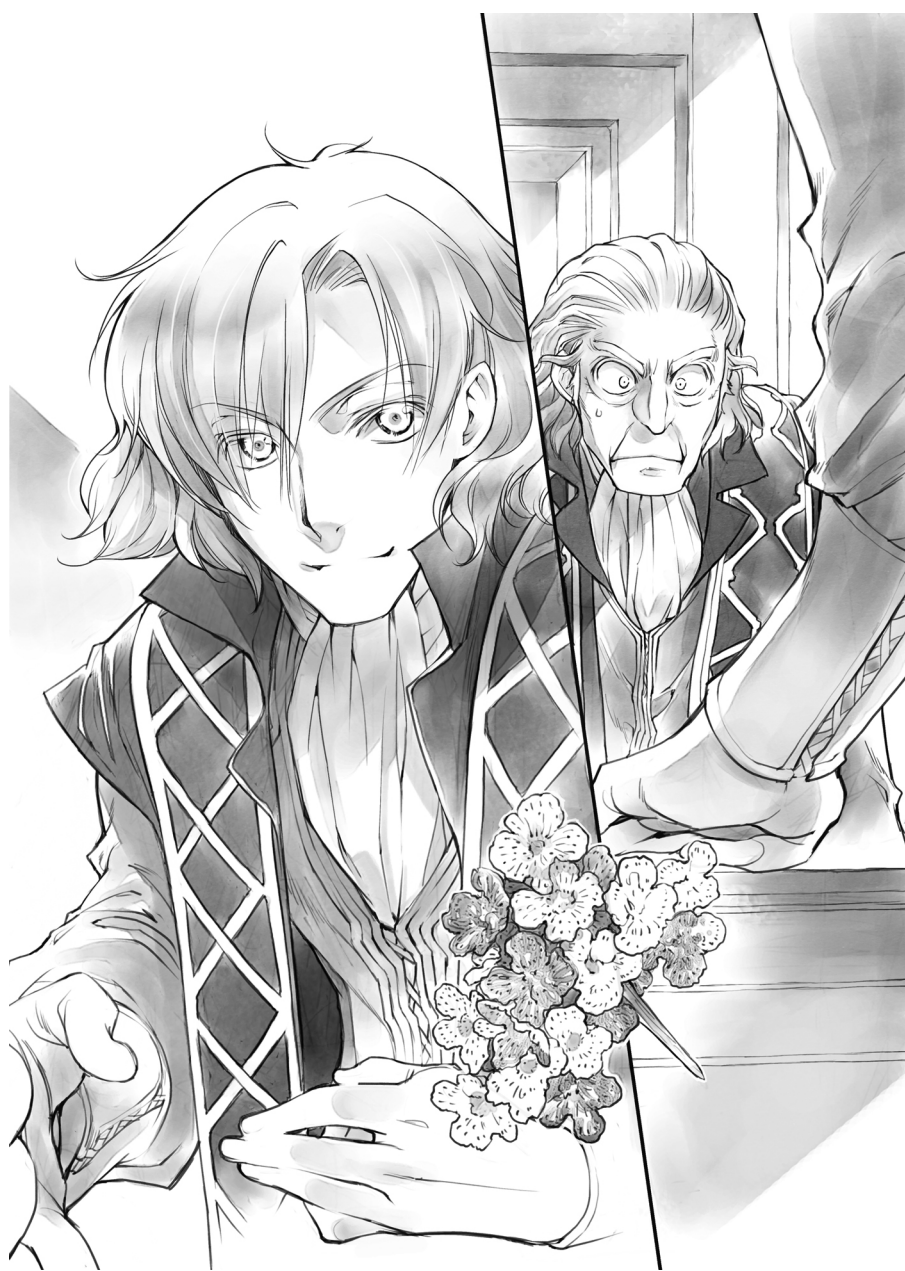
The Guildmaster and the Hair Ornament

“That’s...” murmured the guildmaster, frozen in place. The only time Tuuli had worn this hairpin was during her baptism. What had happened then?

The sight of the guildmaster’s unfaltering smile vanishing in a split second made me so nervous that I turned to Benno for help. Judging by the carnivorous expression on Benno’s face, he was far from worried about the guildmaster freezing up. For a second it looked like he was about to lick his lips hungrily, but then he was back to his normal dark merchant smile.

“Is this perhaps the pin you were looking for, guildmaster?”

“You’re going to sell this?!” The guildmaster’s eyes shot open in surprise and he looked between Benno and me. His desperate expression bereft of a smile was so scary I gasped at the sight of it.



...Lutz, no fair! Why do you get to hide behind Benno?! I tried escaping behind Benno too, but he grabbed my shoulders and pushed me forward.

“Yep. The plan is for them to make more over the winter.”

“Winter handiwork, then...? In that case, I would like to buy that hairpin immediately.” The guildmaster leaned forward to take Tuuli’s hairpiece from me. The gleam in his eyes made it clear that he would never give it back if he got his hands on it, so I hurriedly put it back in my bag.

“That won’t work. I made this for my sister, Tuuli. I can’t sell it.”

“I’ll give you this much.” He sharply held up three fingers. That was probably indicating some price, but I had no idea what. I timidly looked at Benno, who was grinning hard.

“Hm, well... If you make it worth our while, we’ll make getting you a hairpin our top priority. What do you think, Myne?”

“I-I agree with Benno.” I couldn’t think of anything else to say. I could only follow Benno’s lead with a forced smile.

“If we start making it now, we’ll easily have enough time to make one before your granddaughter’s winter baptism. Right, Myne?”

Ah... I get it now. His granddaughter saw Tuuli’s hairpin during the summer baptism and wanted one herself. Benno’s hint finally helped me realize what was going on. As the guildmaster of the Merchants’ Guild, this man normally had more information than anyone else regarding products in the market, but he couldn’t find the hairpin. My family had made this hairpin for Tuuli without selling it and no store in the city was selling anything similar. He had probably grown increasingly worried as the winter baptism ceremony approached.

“...There’s only one month left. Is there enough time to make a new one?”

Making the tiny flowers took a surprising amount of time and thread. My mom had said that she was fine making them in the winter, when we were locked inside without much to do, but any other season would be too busy for her. That said, I had no doubt whatsoever that her attitude would change if making the flowers was work that paid well. It would take some time to buy the thread and ask his granddaughter what kind of hairpin she wanted, but even so, there was plenty of time until the winter baptism ceremony.

“Yes. We can’t sell this one, but there won’t be any problem with us making a new one. Isn’t that right, Lutz?”

“Yeah. No problem.” Lutz and I both nodded in agreement.

Benno, who had been nodding with a grin on his face, followed us up. “That said, neither of them are registered yet. Too bad they can’t sell you the hairpin like this.”

“Ngh... Very well. I will order the hairpin after temporarily registering them.” The guildmaster’s defeat was settled in moments.

Pleased that he had succeeded in registering us without undue complaints or leaking information about the paper, Benno started to leave the room.

“Hold on. The kids can wait here until their guild cards are ready. I’ll order the hairpin right after.”

Benno clicked his tongue under his breath and turned around with a smile. “They’re too young to be left on their own, I’ll stay here with them.”

“That won’t be necessary, they seem quite well behaved. They’ll be fine without you. Right?” The guildmaster’s smile looked gentle, but it was clear he was planning something.

I would probably be wrapped up into some plot of his if I was on my own, so I reflexively grabbed Benno’s hand. “Th-This is a new place to me, so I want to stay with Benno.”

“Heh. You heard the girl.” Benno, wearing a victorious smile, sat on the hard sofa-like chair in the guildmaster’s room. He picked me up and sat me on his lap, then whispered “Good job” and patted my head. He was pretty pleased.

Afterward, I moved to sit next to Benno, and Lutz sat next to me. The guildmaster sat in front of us and began discussing business. “I’ll have one hairpin, then. Please finish it before the winter baptism ceremony.”

“Mmm, what color flowers do you want? Maybe your granddaughter’s favorite colors, or colors that will match her hair, or...”

“That is outside my area of expertise. Just make it like that one,” said the guildmaster, pointing at my tote bag.

But even if it was “outside of his area of expertise,” it was important information. Benno was probably going to be overcharging the guildmaster, so I at least wanted to make a hairpin that would make his granddaughter happy. The smile of a happy granddaughter would be priceless for a grandpa who worked hard to find a certain present for her, after all.

“Um, if possible, could I meet your granddaughter and ask her what she would like? I think she would be happier that way.”

“I want to keep it a secret and surprise her.”

Oh no, it’s happening! He’s going to ruin the gift by forcing it to be a surprise! The only time a surprise gift would make someone happy is if you knew their tastes perfectly and gave it to them at the exact proper timing. Pulling that off would be way too hard for a grandpa who didn’t even know his granddaughter’s favorite color.

“...Um, but the hairpin will need to match her clothes and hair

color too, and she might end up really frustrated if you give her a hairpin after she's already prepared another one." The winter baptism ceremony was close enough that she had probably already prepared an outfit for it. It wouldn't be surprising if she and her mother had already bought a hairpin.

"We're going to be making one from scratch, so I think she'll cherish the gift more if it suits her tastes, rather than one she doesn't look very good in. Don't you think a happy smile will be more wonderful than a look of surprise?"

"Hmm, I see..." The guildmaster stroked his chin and looked up, thinking about something. "Myne, was it? Would you be interested in coming to my store?"

"Not a chance!" said Benno immediately, rejecting him instantly before I could react at all.

"My store is larger than Benno's and has a more storied history. No conditions, either. As you have not been baptized yet, you are not an official apprentice and can easily switch to my store. What do you think?"

It was an attractive offer in some ways, but I had no intention of abandoning Benno after he helped us get so far. Not to mention, the guildmaster was kind of scary. "I owe Benno more than I can ever repay him."

"Hmm. In that case, I will repay him for you."

"Bwuh? Ummm..." I had intended for that to be a firm rejection, but he was still going.

Benno's mood plummeted as I wavered beneath the guildmaster's sheer force of will. His brows furrowed until his forehead was creased and he glared at me while thumping his fingers against his temples.

"Myne, answer the guildmaster. Say you decline."

"I, I-I, I decline!"

"That's unfortunate, but I will give up for now. You won't be able to give an honest answer with an intimidating guard by your side."

Wh-What do you mean, for now?! And I am being honest here!

"Are you free to speak with my granddaughter Freida tomorrow? The sooner the better, I imagine."

"Um, can I go with Benno?!" Today's meeting had firmly taught me the lesson that I should not meet the guildmaster alone under any circumstances. It was dangerous without someone who could deal with his force of will and authority.

However, the guildmaster shook his head. "Unfortunately, Benno and I both have a meeting tomorrow. But in either case, would you really want an adult around when meeting with a girl your age?"

"...Well, okay. If it's just us kids." I had become so exhausted from my battle with the guildmaster that I reflexively nodded at the idea of

it just being a meeting between two girls of the same age. The second I did, Benno clicked his tongue. ...*Bwuh?! What'd I do wrong?!*

The furrows in Benno's brows deepened and the guildmaster's smile returned, making it clear that I had made a careless mistake. "Just us kids" meant that Mark couldn't come along with us. My head started spinning desperately for a solution. I looked around and then realized something.

"L-Lutz is making the hairpin with me, so I think he should come with me! H-He's a kid too, so...!" Going in there alone was too scary. My suggestion to bring Lutz along made Benno's expression loosen up a little.

In contrast, the guildmaster raised his right eyebrow in amusement. "Very well. How does meeting at the plaza tomorrow at third bell sound? I will send Freida to get you."

"Okay."

An employee walked in with our temporary membership cards, as if he had been waiting for our conversation to settle down. Our temporary registrations had apparently gone unhindered.

"This is a temporary membership card for our very own Merchants' Guild. It is a type of magic tool and will unquestionably be necessary when conducting business. Ask Benno for the details. Your cards are the same that merchant apprentices get, so you can now reach the upper floors on your own."

The thin metal membership card reflected a rainbow of colors when held under the light. It was ridiculously different from anything I was used to dealing with, and from every angle looked like the kind of thing that could only exist in a fantasy world. The more I heard about it, the more awed I became. I could only blink in surprise at the awesome powers of magic tools.

"As the final step, please press your blood onto the card to confirm your link with it. Afterward, others will be unable to use it."

"Bwuh?! Blood?!" Was blood essential to make magic work? I still remembered having to press my blood to make the contract magic work.

"Give up, Myne."

"Luuuuutz..."

"C'mon, hold out your hand. I know you can't do this on your own."

"Awww..." I timidly held out my hand, whereupon Lutz poked it with a needle. When a droplet of blood pushed out, I pressed it against the card. The second I did, the card shone brightly. "Hyaaaah?!"

The shining lasted only a moment before the card was back to normal, identical to how it had been beforehand. And by identical I meant that it was free of both blood and my thumbprint. It was

completely clean. ...*Magic tools were convenient, but scary.*

Perhaps due to having seen me panic over all the blood and the card shining, Lutz seemingly made it a point to finish his registration quickly and expressionlessly.

“Your registrations are now complete.”

“Thank you very much.”

Benno started to leave the room, as if to say he had no more business there, and we hurriedly followed after him out of the Merchants’ Guild. A simple registration had completely worn me out.

“Welcome back. It seems the registration was successful.”

When we got back to Benno’s store, we found Mark waiting for us. He occasionally wore the dark smile of a calculating merchant, but he was so often our ally that his smile brought light to my heart.

“Yep. Thanks to Myne, it was a complete victory.”

“Oh? That’s quite rare.”

“Though now that geezer’s got his eyes on us.”

“...This might end up problematic.” It seemed that even Mark found the guildmaster troublesome to deal with. I could empathize with him from the bottom of my heart. “Please, follow me. I have prepared for the prototype paper to be purchased.”

“Alright, let’s get this over with.”

Mark opened the door to Benno’s room and gestured us inside. The fact we were getting paid made me pump my fist.

“Okay! But first, I have a request. Can you teach me about money?”

“Say what?” Benno narrowed his eyes, as if not understanding my intention. Mark looked similarly confused.

“Umm, I haven’t actually touched money before now... I know numbers, but I don’t know the connection they have with money. For example... I have no idea how to express five thousand six hundred and forty lions in copper coins.”

“What?!” Both Benno and Mark let out genuine yells of surprise. “You’ve never touched money...? I mean, you’re not a merchant’s daughter, and you’re still young, so I suppose that’s not surprising? Wait, no, it’s definitely surprising.”

“...Ah, right. Myne’s parents don’t send her on errands. She’ll collapse on the way there,” said Lutz, making everyone sigh in understanding.

“I’ve never actually seen a merchant trading at the gate, and when ordering the tools with Mark I just touched the orders themselves, not the money. I’ve seen my mom use small coins at the market, but I don’t really know what value they have,” I said, upon which Mark walked next to Benno, put a bag on the desk, and spread out coins

onto it.

“Very well. I will begin by teaching you the types of money.”

There were three types of brown copper coins, then two types of silver and gold coins. Lutz gulped, and I could tell he was staring at the gold coins on the desk.

“A small copper coin is worth 10 lions. The medium sized copper coin with a hole in the middle is 100 lions, and the large copper coin 1,000. The small silver coin is 10,000 lions, and this continues onward with large silver coins, small gold coins, and large gold coins.”

The monetary system was very easy to learn thanks to how it worked in multiples of ten. As I nodded to myself, I heard Lutz groaning quietly beside me. It seemed that the scale had gotten so large that he no longer could grasp what was going on. He had a long winter of studying ahead of him, but since he would learn to calculate money while working as an apprentice anyway, I was sure he would be fine.

Benno grabbed the six pieces of prototype paper and lined them up on his desk. “A piece of parchment is worth a small gold. Parchment the size I use for contracts is worth a large silver. Paper this big will be worth about two small silvers.”

...A piece of paper the size of a postcard is worth two small silvers? I had known that paper was expensive, but I didn’t really get it until I saw the money in front of me. Speaking of which, Dad once said that a piece of paper the size of a contract was worth a month of his salary.

“For now, we have to rely on the price of parchment to determine the price. Volrin paper is worth two small silvers, and this trombe paper’s high quality enough to be worth four small silvers. As a handling fee, we’ll subtract thirty percent of that, and to be clear, the money we invested in you until these prototypes were made is separate from the cost of the new suketa you want. We’ll garnish your pay for the cost of the suketa. About fifty percent, considering its price.”

Now that our prototypes were ready, we would have to keep track of the price of the materials and tools we were ordering. I nodded and Benno grinned. “So we agree that your pay will be twenty percent here? We’ll have to go through this again once the paper enters the market and the price of wood changes to match, but for now, this is it.”

“That’s fine.” I nodded again and looked at Lutz, who nodded as well with an expression that made it clear he had no idea what was going on.

Benno set a calculator on his desk with a thump and pushed it to Lutz. “Lutz, do you know how much the three pieces of volrin paper and three pieces of trombe paper will add up to?”

Lutz fiddled with the calculator, working in the three pieces of volrin paper, but then just stopped and shook his head, disappointed. He could do calculations that involved a single digit, but when the numbers got too big and the types of paper too many, he was at a loss.

“And you, Myne?”

“Umm, (three times two is six and three times four is twelve), so it should be eighteen small silvers. With fifty percent of that going to the suketa and thirty to the handling fee, we get twenty percent. That ends up with a total of three small silvers and six large coppers, which means we each get one small silver and eight large coppers.”

Benno stared at me, blinking, and Mark gave a wry smile.

“Correct. It’s very impressive that you could calculate that instantly on your own.” Personally, I didn’t know how to use a calculator and would have to learn that over the winter with Lutz. I wanted to fit into my environment as much as possible.

“On top of that, there’s the slate and slate pen for Lutz. We’ll take that out of his pay.” Two large coppers in total. Lutz handed back two large coppers and received a slate and slate pen in return.

“I can give you the money here or I can deposit it to your guild card if you don’t have a place for it. Which do you want?” It seemed that the Guild functioned partially as a bank. Walking around with a lot of money was a scary idea, and I wanted to save up my earnings to buy a book one day.

“I’ll store the small silver on my card, but please give me the large coppers. I want to give them to my mother.”

It had been a dream of mine back on Earth to donate some of my first earnings to my family in an act of filial piety. I was fine with having that dream granted here.

“Got it. What about you, Lutz?”

“I’ll do the same as Myne.”

“Alright.” I took the eight coppers from Benno and pressed my card against his. I heard a sound like a string being plucked, but the card didn’t look any different.

“You can now get your money from the Guild’s third floor. I’ll need to take you there and show you how it’s done soon.” Benno grinned at the sight of me turning my card around and Mark agreed.

After Lutz went through the same process, he was given six large coppers. The cold weight in my hands excited me so much it was hard to contain. “This is the first time I’ve ever held money before.”

“We earned this money, huh?” Thinking back to the numerous failures which had paved our road to paper made the money in our hands feel all the more meaningful.

“Hey, Lutz. When spring comes, let’s make lots of paper and make a lot of money.”

“Yeah!”

I looked at Benno full of satisfaction, my heart swooning from my first time touching money. “Now that the paper’s finished, we’re done with the Guild, right?” I said, which made Benno scrunch his face up and flick my forehead.

“Don’t be stupid. Your fight starts tomorrow. You have to go to that old geezer’s house and duel it out with his granddaughter without any adult support, remember? Is now the time to relax like an idiot?!”

“Wha? But we’re both kids, and both girls, too.” I didn’t think that our meeting would turn into a fight or anything. After all, I was just going to ask what kind of hairpin she wanted. It wasn’t a meeting and the guildmaster wouldn’t be there, so why would we end up fighting?

“This is the granddaughter that old geezer dotes on, and I hear she resembles him more than anyone else in their family.”

“Sh-She resembles her grandfather?” I tried imagining a little girl with the guildmaster’s face, but it just didn’t work.

“Just be glad you’ve got Lutz with you. Don’t let her suck you up. Lutz, don’t feel compelled to join their conversation, but if you see Myne getting thrown off like she was today, get in there and stop whatever’s happening no matter what. Who knows what traps the geezer has lying for us here. Got it?”

“Got it.” Lutz nodded hard with a serious expression on his face, but I didn’t get why they were both being so dramatic. I mean, we were dealing with a girl who hadn’t even been baptized yet. As I tilted my head in confusion, the coins in my hand noisily clinked together.

“...Speaking of which, how much are we charging for Freida’s hairpin? I didn’t understand the hand sign the guildmaster gave me.”

“The sign he gave meant three small silvers. When I said ‘make it worth our while,’ that went up to four small silvers,” said Benno, stunning me. Even considering the price of thread, that was ridiculous for a single hairpin.

“Wait, wh-whaaat?! That’s scamming him!”

“Do a good job here. It’ll be good advertising for your winter handiwork and impact the price we can sell them at.”

“Um, c-can we lower the price...?” My desperate request was shot down with a single glare.

“You think I would do that for that geezer?”

“No, not at all.” I slumped over after answering. Having to make a hairpin worth four small silver coins was a lot of pressure.

“The price of materials, my introduction, and the handling all add up to about fifty or sixty percent. Cheer up, it’s fine. The price comes from the fact that by not selling the hairpin he had been looking so hard for, you gave him the impression that it would be even harder to obtain than expected. On top of that, there’s the guilt of making you

start your winter handiwork early while winter preparations are still going on. There's good reasons for why the price is so high. It's nothing for you to worry about."

...There may be good reasons for the price, but it's still ripping him off. Sorry, guildmaster...

The Guildmaster's Granddaughter

A little before third bell the next day, Lutz and I went to the plaza and began waiting for Freida. It was at that moment that I realized I hadn't heard anything about Freida to help me recognize her — not the color of her hair, not the way she carried herself, nothing.

"What should we do, Lutz?"

"She'll probably just find us herself. That hair stick of yours sticks out like a sore thumb, and worst comes to worst, her grandpa's right over there. He knows what we look like." Lutz pointed at the nearby Merchants' Guild and shrugged. I was sure that things would be fine, now that he mentioned that.

"Hey, Lutz. How did yesterday go for you? My family was like..."

Yesterday, Lutz and I went home with money for the first time after selling paper to Benno. They were stunned at first, but after I explained how I had made paper with Lutz, they heaped impressed compliments on me. On top of that, they added the money I brought home to their winter preparation funds, which they planned to use to buy a little extra honey this year — a luxury for the winter.

"What about you, Lutz? Do you think they'll accept your dream to be a merchant now?" Lutz and I had completed the paper, which meant that Benno would accept us as his apprentices. But would his family? Would they recognize his passion for this and let it happen?

Lutz gave a bitter frown and shrugged. "...I dunno. They were happy about me earning money, but they're still not okay with the merchant stuff. When I told my dad I made paper with you, he said I should just become a paper-making craftsman. 'A craftsman's what you want to be,' he said."

"It really does seem like your dad wants you to be a craftsman." It was clear that they were proud of their lives as craftsmen and that their expectations for him were different from what he wanted himself. Finding middle ground wouldn't be easy.

"But I don't want to be a craftsman. I want to leave this town and do business in other cities like Benno. You don't want to spend your whole life making just paper either, right Myne?"

"Uh huh. Once we get the mass production of paper going, I want to leave it all to other people and move on to making books. I won't be able to own a bookstore if there aren't a lot of books, and just forget about being a librarian." Producing books would need a lot

more than just the mass production of paper. Without a doubt, I would need to figure out printing. I couldn't let myself be happy about piling a bunch of sheets of paper on top of each other. I still had a long, long way to go.

"I'd be fine running a bookstore with you, Myne. Y'know, I thought about this yesterday after seeing the bookshelf in the Merchants' Guild, but it's gonna be rich people who want books, right?"

"Mhm, I think so." There was no way the commoners of this city, nigh-universally illiterate as they were, would want books. They'd probably ask if there was any way to eat the books before even thinking about reading them.

"That means a bookstore's gonna need to go to all sorts of cities and sell to the nobles there, right? Like that neighboring lord's place that was on the map." Considering the demographic that bought books, that was probably true.

As I blinked in surprise on the inside, impressed that Lutz had been planning out his future while quietly looking at the map in the Merchants' Guild, I heard soft footsteps in front of me.

"Are you Myne, pray tell?"

"Bwuh?! Ah, yes! That's right. Are you Freida?"

"That's right. Nice to meet you." Freida smiled and I saw that she was an adorable little girl with brown eyes, a peaceful smile, and light rose-colored hair as fluffy as it was soft-looking. She spoke with a mature air that implied either quality child rearing or strict training, but in contrast to that she looked short and young for her age. Not that I was one to talk, but still, there was a sort of imbalance to her.

But no matter how I looked at her, she didn't look like the guildmaster. Apparently that rumor had been total nonsense. *I'm glad Benno was worried for nothing.*

"And you are Myne's companion? I would have liked for this meeting to be a girls-only event..." said Freida while looking at Lutz, her cheeks puffed out slightly in a sort of pout. It was true that I thought the idea of having a girls' talk alone with her sounded fun, but I had to save that for people I could relax around. We were going to the guildmaster's house here, after all. You couldn't pay me to go there alone.

I took Lutz's hand, who was looking peeved at Freida's wording, and smiled. "I'm really weak and pass out all the time, so I can't go outside without Lutz. I'm not even allowed to enter Benno's store without Lutz, so if he can't come, then I'll just..."

Before I could finish with "go home," Freida interrupted me. "You collapse with such frequency that you are at risk without constant watch...? Do you perhaps suffer from the devouring?"

“Wha...? The devouring?” The unfamiliar phrasing made me tilt my head in confusion.

Freida placed a finger on her cheek and tilted her head in the opposite direction of mine. “Oh? Are you unfamiliar with the phrase? Let’s see... is there perhaps a heat in your body that acts independent of your will?”

“There is! You know what I’m sick with?!” Information about my disease came from the most unexpected of places. Lutz and I both leaned forward eagerly, waiting for answers, but Freida gave a worried smile.

“...I was once sick with the very same disease. You can tell from the small size of my body, I imagine.” Apparently my small size, lack of growth, and tendency to pass out all had their roots in the disease known as the devouring. I compared my own body, which could easily be mistaken for belonging to a child two or three years younger than me, to Freida’s and gasped.

“How did you cure it?!” Freida’s wording had been past tense. She was *once* sick with it. Which meant she had cured it. Lutz and I exchanged glances and I immediately asked her for details.

Freida’s brows curved in regret and she let out a quiet whisper, mixed with sighs. “...It cost a fortune.”

“Oh no, I’m doomed...” The daughter of a family as rich as the Merchants’ Guild’s guildmaster considered the cure to cost “a fortune.” My family would never be able to afford it. As my shoulders slumped in sorrow, Freida gave them a gentle tap.

“But you still seem very lively to me. As long as you remain dedicating your all to a singular purpose, you will be fine. Just be careful when your spirit shatters, or you lose sight of your goal. That’s when it will rise in strength.”

I see. I’ve been healthy lately since I was working to reach the forest, and now working to make paper. I almost died when I gave up on the mokkan, after all. But, wait... doesn’t that mean I’m like a tuna that’ll die if I stop swimming?

I let out a “hmmm” while trying to process all this new information. I was sick with a disease called the devouring. In order to remain healthy, I needed to have a goal in mind and keep working toward it.

“If you’ve come to terms with this, shall we go to my home?” Freida guided us to the guildmaster’s place and it too was a multi-story building with a store on the first floor. His store was fairly large and closer to the inner wall than Benno’s store. Honestly, “closer” was probably a poor way to put it. His store was basically right next to the wall in such a high-class position that the temple was in sight from the front door.

“You see, I quite like to watch the baptism proceedings, so I always watch them from my window. The hairpin you made last summer stuck out so much it caught my eye.” There was no doubt that she could easily see the children going into the temple from the comfort of her own home. “I had never seen such a hairpin before, but when I asked my grandfather, he could find no information on it. I was so confused when the style had not spread throughout the city by the fall baptism ceremony...”

“They’re a bit time consuming to make, so we usually only have enough time for them during the winter.” *According to my mom*, I added silently.

“I see...”

“If things go according to plan, then girls should be wearing these hairpins starting next spring.”

“Oh my! Does that mean I will be the only one wearing one this winter ceremony? Consider me excited.” The sparkle in Freida’s eyes finally made me understand what Benno had been talking about — by selling her a hairpin before anyone else, we were making it into a premium item that felt special. Nobody but her would be wearing one at the winter baptism ceremony. *Well... If it’s a premium item, I guess it’s not ripping her off? I hope so...*

All floors in the building Freida lived in were being rented to employees and members of the family, no outsiders. I was stunned when she guided me to the second floor of her home. There was cloth everywhere. I had thought the same thing when I went to Otto’s place, but only about the parlor. Here, there were tapestries and cushions everywhere, making every inch of space a rainbow of vibrant colors. There were shelves with animals carved out of stone and metal statues. I could tell at a glance that hers was a wealthy family, holding power close to that of nobility.

“Enjoy, my lady.” Once we reached the parlor, a servant brought us drinks. She poured a red liquid into a metal cup that looked much more expensive than the wooden ones I had grown used to.

“Thank you. This beverage is made of fallold juice thinned with water and sweetened with honey. It’s quite sweet.” The fruit known as a fallold heavily resembled raspberries, so the drink would probably taste like raspberry juice. Or so I thought, but after taking a sip, I was surprised by how sweet it was. It was so rare for me to taste sweet things here that I could feel a grin forming on my face.

“So sweet! This stuff is great, Lutz.”

“It really is. I love it!”

“I’m glad that you two like it. Now then... might I ask how this visit came to be arranged?” Freida tilted her head a bit. What exactly had the guildmaster said to her? I had no idea, but I figured it was

best to start from ground one.

“The guildmaster hired us yesterday to make a hairpin like this for your baptism ceremony.” I took out Tuuli’s hairpin from my tote bag and showed it to Freida, who nodded.

“I know that. But I would have expected my grandfather to order one without consulting me.” *Well... Bingo. She knows her grandfather well. He was planning to order one in secret and surprise her with it.*

“Mmm, he said something like that, but I thought that you would be happier if you could choose your favorite colors and have it match your outfit, so I asked to meet you.” Freida had light-pink hair, so an ornament made for Tuuli’s green hair wouldn’t have fit her at all. Red flowers would be a better pick, or maybe white and green flowers to really drive home a tidy image.

“I see. I thought that maybe Grandfather had been surprisingly considerate, but in reality, you saved him from himself.”

“If possible, could I see what outfit you plan to wear at the ceremony? I would like to know what color the embroidery is.” I was trying to avoid confirming her thoughts directly, but when I changed the subject Freida giggled as if seeing right through me. She really did act and speak more maturely than I did. At the very least, she lived in another world from the kids we went to the forest with. *Maybe all kids from a rich background act mature like this?*

“Wait just a moment. I’ll bring them out now.” The moment Freida left the room, Lutz let out a comically loud sigh. He circled his shoulders and bent his neck around, making it clear that sitting still had been very uncomfortable for him.

“Are you okay, Lutz?”

“I just can’t handle conversations like that. I dunno what colors fit which clothes and I can’t talk all fancy like that.”

I nodded. While speaking to Freida I had subconsciously been using more polite wording than usual, which probably made Lutz afraid of saying the wrong thing and being rude. “You should probably learn how to talk politely once you start working, but I’ll take care of things today. It’ll be hard staying quiet for so long, but stay with me, okay? I’d be scared alone.”

“Right.” Just having an ally nearby gave me plenty of strength. As I let out a sigh of relief, Freida came back.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. Here is the outfit.”

“Wow, they’re amazing!”

Freida had brought in the outfit that she would be wearing for her baptism ceremony. It was similar to Tuuli’s in that the primary color was white, but that was all that was similar. The thread in Freida’s was thicker with fluffy wool, making it warm just to look at.

I fell into thought, thinking back to my own winter clothes which

were just layers and layers of clothes piled on top of each other. Since the summer baptism ceremony required light clothes, the quality of one's outfit relied more on the maker's skills than their financial circumstances. But during the winter, the difference between rich people's and poor people's outfits was stark.

"Freida, do you like these colors?"

"I do. Would I have asked for the clothes to be made this way otherwise?"

I looked at the red thread embroidering the white clothing and compared it with Freida's hair. It seemed very possible to make a hairpin that matched both her hair and clothes.

"Do you have any leftover thread that was used for this embroidering? I think a hairpin with flowers of the same color would look the best. If there is leftover thread, could I have some of it? I'll try looking for thread of the same color."

"I believe there was. One moment, I'll be right back with it."

I asked for some of the thread, which I would show to Benno so he could look for thread of the same color. He was charging such a rip-off price for the hairpin that getting expensive thread should be fine.

"Will this be enough?" Freida returned with a clump of thread large enough that you could probably embroider another outfit with it.

"That's more than enough, but..."

"Then please do have it all." She handed me the clump of dark-red thread, leaving me at a loss for words.

...If she just gives me the materials, won't the price be even more of a rip-off?! Either way, I couldn't bring myself to say something like "Mr. Benno is ripping you off, so I'll discount the price a bit to cover the thread." That would just make his relationship with the guildmaster even worse, which I didn't want. Not to mention that I just heard Benno lecturing me in my head: *"When you get the chance to earn money, take it and profit as much as you possibly can."*

As I softly groaned to myself and thought of how to avoid ripping off Freida, my eyes fell on her hairstyle. She was wearing her hair in two bunches, what I would have called "twintails" back in Japan.

"Freida, how are you planning to wear your hair on the day of the baptism?"

"The same as I am now?"

Twintails would need two hairpins of the same type. A single one would just look unbalanced. *...Holy cow, I'm glad I came here. Mainly, I'm glad I stopped the guildmaster from trying to keep this a secret. If we had made one just like Tuuli's, not only would it have not matched her hair or outfit, she would need to change her hairstyle for it or risk looking silly.*

That would have been a nightmare.

“In that case, won’t you need two hairpins?”

“...I suppose so.” Freida blinked, as if the thought had never occurred to her until now. This was the perfect opportunity to make this less of a scam. I let out a sigh of relief and Freida put a finger on her chin as she began thinking with a somewhat serious look on her face.

“It seems that we’ll have to pay you twice as much now.”

“No, that’s fine. This thread alone can cover the cost of the second one.” I wouldn’t be able to bear ripping them off twice as hard, especially now that she had given me the thread to use. It’d make my stomach hurt.

“Oh, but that simply won’t do. We have a deal that established the price of the hairpin. That is not a deal I intend to break. We will pay double.”

“But, but! You gave us the materials we need, asking for double the money would just be too much...” An endless loop of back and forth was beginning to develop between Freida and I, when Lutz suddenly broke his silence and suggested something while scratching his head.

“Why not just make the second one half price?”

“What?”

“Myne, you want to give the second one away for free due to the free thread. Freida, you want to pay full price to avoid any trouble happening between the guildmaster and Benno. Let’s cut a deal and make the second one half price.”

“Lutz, you’re a genius! What do you think, Freida?” I immediately threw my support in for Lutz’s compromise. I turned around and saw that Freida was looking at me with a puzzled expression.

“That’s fine, but... don’t you know that when you get the chance to earn money, you should take it and profit as much as you possibly can?” said Freida, in complete contrast to her cute and dainty appearance. It seemed that Freida was most definitely the daughter of a merchant and the granddaughter of the guildmaster.

“Um, is that like, a famous merchant saying? I feel like Benno said the same thing once...”

“Oh? I believe that is just how commerce works.” Freida tilted her head as if that was the most obvious thing in the world, but I just shook my head.

“I think there’s, like, a limit? Products have a proper price that’s fair, and... Well, we found a compromise, so it’s fine.”

“You two are something else,” giggled Freida. And not derisively, either. Her laughter was friendly and natural. It wasn’t exactly like a friendship born from a heated argument, but it was like we felt an odd

sense of solidarity as kids on other sides of the same fence.

I couldn't puff out my chest with pride and say I'd done some fine business, but we had settled the details on the hairpins. The thought crossed my mind that we should be leaving, but seconds for the juice were brought out and Lutz went from wanting to leave as soon as possible to having his eyes locked on the cups. I too found myself tempted by the sweetness and let things shift into some casual chatting.

"Oh, so you go to the forest all the time to pick up nuts, fruit, and firewood. Kind of like a daily picnic." Well... A little less relaxed than that, since we depended on the firewood for survival. Really, I was more interested in Freida's daily life, since she didn't have to go to the woods constantly for firewood.

"What kind of things do you do, Freida? The children of merchants don't go to the forest, right?"

"My favorite thing to do is... Ahaha." After a pause, Freida giggled and continued. "Counting money, perhaps?"

Wait... What? Did I imagine that? Are my ears going bad? For a second there I thought I heard a cute, precious little girl say she had a pretty insane hobby.

"Oh, I'm sorry. That's not entirely accurate." Freida shook her head and corrected herself as I sat there, taken aback. *Oh, she just said the wrong thing*, I thought to myself in relief, moments before disaster. "It's not just counting money that I love, but saving it up as well. The weight of a bag of money fills me with joy and no sound is more pleasant to the ears than that of coins rubbing together, don't you agree?"

"...Ahaha, well, maybe. I also like seeing my savings go up," I said, forcing the words out before shutting my eyes. *...It wasn't my imagination. Who brought up hobbies here? It was me! I'm so stupid! I thought her hobby would be like, making candy, or sewing, or some other fancy lady thing, not hoarding money... I didn't want to know that...*

"My, my! You understand my hobby?!" Pleased by my agreement, Freida began talking about just how much she loved money. "For as long as I can remember, I've loved the glint of gold coins more than anything else. My greatest joy is counting Grandfather's monthly earnings with him each month, tallying up each gold coin." *She's... She's not even thinking about coppers or silvers, just golds. Curse you, rich people!*

Freida continued her impassioned speech as I shook my fist at her on the inside. Her eyes were wet with bliss, her cheeks were flushed, and I could see her lips trembling with utter joy as words regaling the splendor of commerce and counting money passed through them.

"As of late, my heart has jumped with joy as I've thought about

how to increase my wealth and pondered what would make for a good product to sell.”

Oh no... This girl's really weird. What a waste of a real cutie.

“You know, Myne.”

“Yes?” I said, hurriedly sitting up straight since I had been drifting off. Freida took my hand and squeezed it tightly, her eyes shining.

“I think I’ve come to like you quite a lot.”

“Um, thank you?” *Please ignore that my voice cracked while I said “you.”* Not even I understood what she liked so much about me. I could only tilt my head in confusion as Freida, with her adorable face right up close to mine, smiled.

“Would you work with me?”

“No!” Before I could react, Lutz immediately turned her down.

“Oh, but why? Our store is larger than Benno’s, and has a more storied history. We would accept her unconditionally, of course. She hasn’t been baptized yet and is not officially Benno’s apprentice, so she could easily switch to our store. But in any case, I am asking Myne here, not you.”

...Um? I feel like this same thing happened yesterday. “I appreciate the offer, but I owe Benno more than I can ever repay him, so...”

Before I could finish my sentence, Freida smiled and interrupted me. “Oh, that’s no issue. I can just repay him for you.”

“Bwuh? Ummm...” I had intended for that to be a firm rejection, but she was still going. The rumors were all true. Benno’s fears hadn’t been unfounded. *.. She is just like the guildmaster! She’s saying the same things, just in a different tone!*

Lutz’s mood plummeted as I wavered beneath the force of will contained within Freida’s smile as she listed off reason after reason why joining her store would be a good idea.

“Myne, you gotta be firm, like yesterday.”

“Freida... I, I-I, I decline!” I was afraid that a firm rejection would make her cry, given that she was a little girl, but her eyes remained clear. Or more accurately, her eyes narrowed a bit, as if her competitive spirit had been inflamed.

“Oh, that’s a shame. But there is still plenty of time until your baptism ceremony, Myne, and as you are temporarily registered with the Merchants’ Guild, there will be many opportunities for us to meet. Ahaha. I’m looking forward to that.”

Hmm. I wonder why it feels like I’m a mouse staring down a snake. I wonder why it feels like all my escape routes have been blocked off. Hmmmmmm. Cold sweat ran down my back. *...Benno, I’ll stop whining about you ripping people off, so please save meeee!*

Freida's Hair Ornaments

We left Freida's house and started our walk home. She had seen us off with a smile, so why did it feel like I had just narrowly escaped alive? Why did I feel more tired now, after eating sweets and chatting, than I did after going to the forest?

"Oh, finally finished with your business discussion?"

"Mr. Mark?"

As we passed by Benno's store, Mark called out to us. We were planning to go straight home since Benno had told us to report back the next day, but Mark smiled and gestured us into the store.

"Master Benno is getting, shall we say, fidgety. Would it be possible for you to give your report now?"

"...Yes." My stomach hurt just thinking about how mad he'd get over me giving a discount on the second one without consulting him, so I wanted to get this over with as soon as possible.

"Sir, may I allow Myne and Lutz inside?"

"Yeah, let'm in." Past the open door was Benno, who was slapping his desk to hurry us inside. "How'd it go, Myne? How was that geezer's granddaughter?"

"Ummm, she was a very cute little lady."

"Don't sugarcoat it. What'd you think of her?"

I tried making my report sound nice, but Benno shook his head and told me to tell the truth. I let out a sigh and complied. "Honestly, she acts so different from how she looks that it's still hard for me to believe. But she's not just a girl who loves money. She's been watching the guildmaster since birth and now the concepts of earning money, expanding her grandfather's business, and capitalizing on opportunities for profit are all second nature to her. She has amazing talent as a merchant."

"You think she's amazing too, huh...?" Benno scratched his head and sighed.

"Ummm, how should I put this... She was really cute, but really weird. Right, Lutz?" I said, summarizing my thoughts. Lutz rose an eyebrow and looked down at me, eyes silently saying *"that's the pot calling the kettle black."*

Benno gave a meaningful grin and looked at Lutz. "What about you, Lutz? What'd you think?"

"She tried to invite Myne to their store just like the guildmaster

did. I think we need to be careful around her. Also, uh... I thought she was a lot like Myne."

"Bwuuh?! How?!" *That's just... unbelievable!* I demanded an explanation for his shockingly bad opinion.

Lutz shrugged. "She talked about money the way you talk about books. Same expression and all. You're both obsessed with the thing you like most, and just like you said about her, you look cute on the outside but you're weird on the inside."

...Oh, huh. I guess I look kinda cute now. There were no mirrors in my home, so I only ever saw myself in the blurry reflection of our water bucket. And the only people who ever complimented me up front were strangers and my overbearing dad, so I thought everyone was just being polite.

People didn't just call me a bookworm in the past, they straight up called me a weirdo. I was well aware of that. It didn't really bother me, but I didn't look cute in my past life. I looked like a total geek that lived in a library, so nobody ever said I didn't act like I looked.

Siblings tend to look pretty similar, so I imagined Tuuli on a quest for books, acting extremely bizarre in public, and facepalmed at myself. "...I'm sorry. I feel a little regret now."

"You should be feeling a lot of it."

"Ngh..."

Benno watched me crumble with despair and, grinning, tapped his desk with a finger. "So? How'd the business talk go?"

"Umm, Freida's going to be wearing her hair tied up in two places, so we'll be making two hairpins instead."

"Good. Twice the profit," said Benno like it was the most natural thing in the world, making my heart thump with fear. I had to tell him what I had done, but still, I was terrified of what would come next.

"Um, well, I..."

"What?" Benno glared at me with his dark-red eyes. I gave a tiny gasp, trying to word my explanation properly. After watching me flounder for a bit, Benno shifted his gaze from me to Lutz. He jerked his chin up and Lutz answered for me.

"Freida gave us thread to make the hairpins with, so Myne said she would make both of them for the price of one."

"Lutz?!"

"She what?!"

Lutz continued, ignoring both Benno and my reactions. "But Freida was insisting that she follow the agreement and pay for both. It looked like they'd be fighting over it forever, so I stepped in and said we'd sell the second one half price, which they agreed to."

Benno rose an eyebrow at Lutz's explanation and looked at me. "Myne. Are you stupid? Did you not listen to me? Did you forget

everything I said?"

"N-No. I remembered, which is why I didn't give a discount on the first one. But after we agreed on the second one being half price, Freida also told me: 'When you get the chance to earn money, take it and profit as much as you possibly can.'"

"You're really letting a customer lecture you on how to sell things?" said Benno with an exasperated sigh before putting a hand on his forehead and shaking his head. I mean, I did think it was a little embarrassing that Freida found the need to explain to me how businesses worked, but still. Overcharging people didn't sit well with me.

"I know what you're saying, but please give me a break here. We're charging so much above its like, proper market value, that it honestly hurts my stomach."

"You're not gonna survive as a merchant if taking money makes you feel guilty. Good grief... Well, you're the only one losing money here. You charged her for the second one and that's what matters. Otherwise, rumors would have spread that our store gives a free hairpin with every purchase, and dealing with those customers would have been a real pain. Pick your battles and be more careful about what will happen if you lose."

I hadn't imagined for a second that rumors like that would spread and impact our customers. He had basically just told me I was still too ignorant to do business here, which made me slump my shoulders sadly.

"Aww. I didn't think that far ahead. I'm sorry," I apologized. "But moving on, this is the thread that Freida gave us. I would like white thread that will go well with it. As for its length, ummm..." I took out the measuring tape from my tote bag and stretched it between two fingertips. "I would like thread that's about... one hundred felles long."

"Alright. Go buy some with Mark tomorrow. While you're at it, buy enough thread to cover your winter handiwork," said Benno, who then told us we could leave.

Lutz and I left his store together and went home. I now knew exactly how a tired working man felt on his way home to his wife and kids. I wanted to go home and let it heal me.

"I'm home."

"Welcome back, Myne. How was the girl you were meeting today? Are you friends now?" Tuuli, on cooking duty, smiled at me while stirring the pot. Upon seeing Tuuli — a cute, kind girl who took care of others while being both a master chef (in process) and a sewing beauty (planned) with a good seamstress job — indescribable

emotions welled up in my chest.

“Tuuuuulii!”

As I hugged her tight, Tuuli furrowed her brows a bit and peered into my face. “What’s wrong, Myne? Did something bad happen?”

“You’re an angel, Tuuli. The healer of my heart. You’re the greatest older sister in the world, but I’m just sick and useless. I didn’t realize it until Lutz told me today, but I’m a weird little sister who acts way different from how she looks. Sorry, Tuuli.”

“Haaah... You just now realized?” Tuuli sighed and, after patting my head a few times, pointed toward the bedroom. “I’m cooking right now, Myne. Come help once you put your stuff down.”

“Okay.” I set my tote bag down and started helping Tuuli. Despite still being called super small all the time, I had grown a little taller and could now safely stir the pot if I stood on something. Which is exactly what I did while reporting what happened today to Tuuli.

“So like, the girl’s name is Freida and she’s really cute, but all she’s interested in is money. She said her favorite thing to do is count gold coins.”

“Gold coins?! I’ve never even seen one of those before and she has enough of them to count? She must be super rich.” Tuuli was more surprised by how much money Freida had than by how weird it was that she loved to count money. Where we lived it was normal for people to work their whole lives and never earn a gold coin, so I could understand how big of a deal that would be to her.

“Her house was crazy, too. There were a ton of decorations and it was really pretty. Oh, also, Freida told me the name of what I’m sick with. It’s apparently called the devouring.”

“...I’ve never heard of that before.” Tuuli tilted her head. I couldn’t blame her for not knowing; it seemed like barely anyone knew what it was called.

“It’s a really rare disease. Not even Otto or Benno recognized it, and Freida only knew about it because she was sick with it too. But she also said it cost a fortune to cure. If a rich girl like her said it costs a fortune, well...”

“We’ll never be able to afford it.” Tuuli came to the same conclusion as me in a snap. It wasn’t even a matter of debate. We were so poor we couldn’t even afford to call for a doctor when I collapsed in fever for days in a row.

“...Uh huh. But she told me what I had to do to stop it from getting worse.”

“Really?”

“She said I’ll be fine as long as I have a goal that I’m working toward with all I have.”

“Wow. You have been more energetic since you’ve found

something you like, now that I think about it. You used to always just cry and complain that only I got to do things...”

Speaking of which, many of Myne’s memories were of her crying and bothering Tuuli while she was sick. The fact that Tuuli just casually compared me with how I used to be probably meant that she noticed how much I had changed. I fell into thought, and Tuuli hurriedly patted my head again.

“Don’t feel bad. I’m just glad you’ve been more healthy. So, how did the hairpin stuff go?”

“I learned Freida’s favorite colors and she gave me the same thread she used to embroider her clothes. I’ll make the hairpins with that. Oh, and since she’s wearing her hair up in two places, she needs two hairpins.”

“Neat.”

We continued to prepare food and eventually Mom came home, then Dad, who had been working the night shift so much lately I hadn’t seen him for a few days. While enjoying my first meal with the whole family I’d had for some time, I talked about the guildmaster’s house. Everyone listened with rapt attention, since they normally didn’t have the opportunity to go into the homes of rich people.

Mom was most interested in the decorative tapestries and cushions, whereas Dad was curious about the kinds of alcohol they had lined up in the parlor. Tuuli seemed interested in what kind of clothes Freida was wearing and stuff, so all her questions were about things Freida owned.

After the much more lively than expected meal was over, I caught Mom and asked her to return the needles I used for thread.

“What for?”

“I’m going to make new hairpins. Remember what I said yesterday? Freida wants them. I went today to hear the details. She wants me to use the thread she embroidered her clothes with, so I brought some home with me.”

“Please show me that thread, dear.” My mom, a dyer by trade and skilled seamstress, didn’t even try to hide how interested in the thread she was. She retrieved the needles and pressed me to take the thread out.

The moment I took the thread out of my tote and placed it on the kitchen table, Mom picked it up and started looking it all over. Tuuli was peering at it too, interested as an apprentice seamstress in what kind of thread is used on the clothing rich girls wear.

“It takes a long, long time to dye anything this deep of a red.”

“I knew it, this thread is really high quality.”

I readied the needles while the two of them fiddled with the thread, enraptured.

“She’s even going to buy the hair ornaments at a high price since nobody else sells them. I’m going to work really hard to make good ones for her.”

“Are they going to be like mine?”

In Tuuli’s case I had prioritized being economical with thread and thus made a bundle of different colors from whatever thread we had left, but for Freida I had plenty of red thread. Plus, we were overcharging her so much that I really wanted to make fancier hairpins than Tuuli’s. It was the least I could do.

“I’m going to make the flowers bigger, since I have so much thread this time.”

My plan was to make a bouquet of several roses with small white flowers. Yes, I was disappointed with my poor imagination that first thought of roses when it came to rich young ladies. But still, roses did manage to look both flashy and dignified.

I sewed the thread in a way that was like decorative lace with wavy edges, so that it would look more like flower petals when wrapped around itself in the end. Once it was long enough, I twisted it around, sewed just the bottom part together, then spread out the “petals” enough that it looked like a tiny rose.

“Wow, so cute!” Tuuli liked it enough that I started work on another one. Dad, who was drinking while keeping an eye on us, called out to Mom, who was eagerly watching my hands.

“Hey, Effa. If you’re that interested in all this, want me to make another needle?”

“Dad, I want one too! Can you make two?”

Mom’s enthused hug and Tuuli’s cute request put Dad straight into a good mood. He started carving the wood immediately. He managed to finish the thin needles pretty fast, since he had experience making them now.

Tuuli took the first needle and started sewing with me. Her dexterity had apparently leveled up thanks to her work as a seamstress. After just a bit of teaching, she was pumping the mini roses out in no time. To be honest, she was going way faster than me.

When Mom’s pair was finished, she took them and started sewing right away at a monstrous speed with a full smile on her face. She had been watching me work so closely that she already knew how to make them.

“Myne, want me to make the sticks for those hair things?” said Dad enthusiastically, with nothing else to do since he had finished the sewing needles.

I hated to turn him down, but that was Lutz’s job. Without him making the pins for the hair ornaments, I wouldn’t have any excuse for bringing him to Freida’s with me. Not to mention that Lutz wasn’t

the kind of person who would accept money for no work. If he didn't make the pins, he'd end up with no pay.

"I appreciate the thought, but no thanks. That's Lutz's job."

"Lutz this, Lutz that. You've been pretty cold to me lately, Myne."

There went Dad pouting again. He loved his family so much that he felt weird jealousy toward Otto, Lutz, and so on. It got kind of annoying sometimes.

I let out a sigh and shook my head. "If you really want to make something, why not make something for me instead of for other kids? I want a hair stick with a hole in the tip for my baptism ceremony."

"I get it, Myne. You don't want me to make sticks for other kids, huh? Feeling jealous?"

...Um, no. I have no idea why you would even think that.

Dad must have had some weird delusions going through his head, as he grinned happily and started making my hair stick. Since he was back to being pleased, I returned to my own sewing. Tuuli and Mom had gotten quite the lead on me while I was talking to Dad.

"That's enough red flowers. The ones we're making now can be the last ones." We needed a lot of the same flower, but things went by a lot faster when all three of us worked together. Mom in particular was very fast. As expected, the slowest out of us was me, the one getting paid to do this.

"Awww, we're already done?" Tuuli pursed her lips unhappily, having quite enjoyed the sewing. I shrugged while making a rose. My initial plan had been to have three mini roses for each hairpin, but now we had four for each. The hairpins just weren't big enough for more.

"You don't want to waste the thread they gave us, right?"

"Oh, that's true. We don't want to waste pretty thread like this." Despite her disappointment, Tuuli nodded and began packing up her needles.

"Next, I'm going to make a lot of tiny white flowers from thread Benno's buying me. I think it'll be good thread just like this red thread, since they need to go together. I'll have the thread tomorrow, so hopefully we can all work together again."

"I can't wait!" Tuuli smiled at me and happily hugged the sewing box to her chest. *Hmm... If Tuuli's this into it, maybe she should make hairpins with me over the winter instead of baskets?*

The next day, Mark, Lutz, and I went to buy thread together. It was the same store we visited with the craftsman from before when making the suketa screen. The fact we bought the top-quality spinne thread last time must have left a deep impression on the store owner, as he stood up as soon as he saw us.

“Oh, if it isn’t the customers that bought spinne thread. Do you need more?”

“Yes, we’ll be ordering more at a later date. Today we have visited in search of another kind of thread,” said Mark, reminding me that Benno was having the craftsman make the larger screen by spring.

My head was so full of Freida’s hair ornaments and my winter handiwork that I forgot all about preparing to make paper in the spring. ...*I really need a notepad. Not a stone slate where the words rub right off, an actual notepad.*

“What do you need today?”

“Um, white thread that’s just like this red thread.” I took the thread out of my tote bag and the store owner gave it a hard look, then nodded.

“Pretty expensive stuff. You’ll want thread like this to match it.” He took out two types of thread and placed them in front of me. I compared them several times with Freida’s red thread and decided on the one that made the red stand out in a more appealing way. I then handed it to the store owner.

“I would like one hundred felles of this thread, and one hundred felles of that green thread. Also, I would like a bunch of thread in a lot of different colors, the cheapest kind of thread you have. Two hundred felles of each color, please.”

I needed to provide two different supply orders, one for Freida’s thread and one for my winter handiwork. It was for this purpose that I always carried my supply order set around in my tote bag — wooden cards to write on, the measuring tape, ink, and a pen made from carved wood. After stating my orders, I began scratching them onto the cards then and there.

The cheap thread looked less vibrant, but if we we’d be charging about two large coppers for them, we couldn’t be picky with our thread. People in this world didn’t generally wear hairpins during their daily lives, which meant they would be tucked away for special occasions. Nobody would buy the hairpins if they weren’t priced accordingly; they needed to be cheap enough to justify purchasing for a single event. The guildmaster, spending six small silvers for two hairpins, was simply abnormal and couldn’t be used as a baseline — even if it was for his prized granddaughter.

“I’ll need some time to get the handiwork thread ready. You want me to take it all to the store once I’m done?”

“Yes. Please do.”

I put only the expensive thread I was using for Freida’s hair ornament into my bag and left the store. The thread store was close to my house, so we parted ways from Mark and went home without him. On the way I reported to Lutz that I finished using the red thread last

night, which made his eyes bulge.

“Wha? You’re already finishing the flowers? Didn’t you say you’d take your time cause the baptism’s a month away?”

“I think I’ll finish by tomorrow or the day after. Mom and Tuuli started helping and they’re way faster than me. They finished in no time. It would have taken a lot longer if it were just me.”

My initial plan involved me going to the forest and store frequently enough that I would only have time to make the hairpins from dinner to bedtime, which would have led to me taking seven to ten days to finish. I hadn’t expected in my wildest dreams that I would run out of things to do in a single day.

“Alright. I’ll get the pin parts done soon.”

“Mhm, thanks. My dad wanted to join us and make them, but...”

“Really...?” Lutz sighed at the thought of his job being taken.

“...At first I thought it would be really bad for my family to do all the work for us, but after thinking about it, I realized it wouldn’t really be bad at all. Merchants are all about selling things that other people make, after all. Benno’s making a profit from the handling fee he gets from selling our stuff even though he doesn’t help make them at all, right?”

“Huh. Good point.” Lutz looked at me with a look of understanding washing over his face. He didn’t have to do the work to get paid. Merchants made a living by making money from moving products from one place to another. We were still thinking on the level of craftsmen, not merchants.

“This time we told Benno and the guildmaster that we’d be making it together, and I don’t want to change our story, but I think we need to study harder about how merchants work.”

“Yeah.”

When I arrived home with the thread, Tuuli and Mom did my work for me, as expected. In the time it took me to make a single white flower, Tuuli made two and Mom made four. They finished in no time. I tried making some leaves with the green thread, but they ended up making all of them before I could. No matter the situation, I always ended up useless.

...In conclusion: Just like I thought, becoming a sewing beauty was out of the cards for me. I had made the right call by working to become a merchant apprentice.

Delivering the Hair Ornaments

I sewed the pin parts onto the flowers and finished the hair ornaments. The sight of them made even me let out a gasp of awe. The ones I'd made for Freida had ended up much more gorgeous than I had expected.

Each had four dark-red roses surrounding white flowers which made the red stand out more. The green thread shaped into leaves were scattered around by the small white flowers, accenting the colors.

"...Hey, Myne. These look pretty dang different from Tuuli's. They're, uh, real flashy." The completed hairpins looked so good that Lutz actually flinched upon seeing them.

They looked better for two simple reasons. One, the thread was better. It was thinner and more silky, so the completed flowers in turn looked more delicate and, of course, silky. Two, the craftsmanship was on another level. I mostly made Tuuli's hairpin by myself, but this time Mom and Tuuli helped, which resulted in much more finely crafted flowers.

"Don't you think hairpins like this will look way better on her than something like Tuuli's, considering the kinds of clothes she'll be wearing and all that?"

"I dunno what would or wouldn't look good on her."

As Lutz shook his head, I crossed my arms and fell into thought. "Mmm, you'll have to learn more about that. Benno's store mainly deals in clothes and the like, and it seems like he's been increasingly aiming his stock at nobles."

Lutz's eyes wavered. People tended not to like looking at their weak points head on. "Uuuuh, Myne. What're we gonna do with the hairpins now that they're done?"

"I'll show them to Benno and then deliver them to the guildmaster. Let's go to Benno's."

I put the hairpins into a small basket and covered them with one of our more clean handkerchiefs so that other people couldn't see them.

"You carry the basket, Myne. I'll take the bag."

My tote bag that was filled with the supply order stuff, a stone slate, and a slate pen was surprisingly heavy for me, so Lutz's help was appreciated. I handed my tote bag to Lutz with sincere thanks and

held the small basket myself.

“Oh, what brings you here today?” said Mark after seeing us.

“We finished the hair ornaments. I wanted to show them to Benno before delivering them to the guildmaster, but...”

“Alright, let’s see them,” said Benno from behind me out of nowhere, causing me to jump with a tiny shriek. I turned around and saw Benno, wrapped in regal clothing from head to toe. He must have just gone to visit a noble.

“Welcome back, sir.”

“Yeah. Follow me, you two.” Benno gave Mark a nod and then headed to his office with us in tow.

“So, where are they?” he said right after we sat down. I took the handkerchief off the small basket and held it out to Benno.

“What do you think?”

Benno took one of the hair ornaments out of the basket, looked at it, put it back, and then gave a heavy sigh. “...Myne, you didn’t have to give a discount on the second one.”

“Huh? But we were really overcharging them. Since thread is the only material we need to buy for these, we would have ended up with three whole small silvers of profit.”

“Learn more about the value of products, idiot. All the things you’ve brought me are luxury items. If you don’t understand how high-quality luxury items are priced, you’re going to disturb the market.”

“...I’m sorry.”

I knew by now that my sense of value conflicted with this world’s, and I understood that Benno was protecting me from sending the market into turmoil. I really did understand that clothes and fashion accessories were expensive, but I didn’t know how many of them were sold in the city and for how much since I didn’t have the strength to explore stores around the city. Especially since upper-class stores rejected entry based on age and clothing.

...Anyway. *Luxury items, huh?* The things I had brought him — shampoo, paper, hairpins — were just normal everyday items to me, but not to him. Not to this world. I knew that in theory, but it was hard for me to really understand it given my Japanese upbringing. All I was thinking about is: I want part of my old life back, and if it’s not available, I’ll use something in its place or make it myself.

“Mr. Benno, I want to deliver this to the guildmaster, but I don’t know how I should go about doing that. Right now I’m thinking I should set up an appointment to meet him.”

“Alright. This is a good opportunity for a lesson.”

He took out my supply order set and wrote on a board that I wanted an appointment with the guildmaster, as well as my name and

my business with him.

“Hand this to the receptionist on the third floor of the Guild. When the appointment is settled, the receptionist will write the meeting time on the board and give it back.”

“Okay, I’ll deliver it on my way home.”

“Aaah, hold it. You two will be eaten alive if you go there alone. I’ll go with you.”

Surely he was exaggerating? We were just going to make an appointment.

After Benno changed clothes, we headed to the Merchants’ Guild. This time I used my own guild card to reach the upper floors. We reached the third floor with no issues. It felt like I had moved up in the world a little.

Subsequently, as taught by Benno, I handed the board to the receptionist. Lutz and I smiled at each other, filled with the satisfaction of a job well done, and started to leave. But before we could, the receptionist stopped us.

“One moment please. The guildmaster said that if children by the name of Myne and Lutz were to come, let them in immediately.”

“Bwuh?!”

The receptionist instructed us to go into the guildmaster’s room and as I panicked I heard Benno murmur “Figures.” If we had been alone, we really might have been eaten alive. *Oooh, Benno, you’re a genius! I’m so glad you came with uuus!*

We went to the guildmaster’s office, and although he grimaced a bit at the sight of Benno, he let us all in. “What brings you here today?”

“We finished Freida’s hair ornaments and are ready to deliver them.”

“Let’s see them, then.”

I took out my little basket and moved the handkerchief aside, then set it on the guildmaster’s desk and pushed it his way so he could see inside. I knew it would be fine since Benno gave them a passing grade, but my heart was still beating really fast.

The guildmaster peered into the basket, took one of the hairpins out, and investigated it with a serious look. He raised an eyebrow and looked at me. “...This hairpin is quite different from the one you showed me earlier.”

“I put extra effort into these so they would be worth their price. Do you think the other one is better? I talked with Freida and tried making them match her hair and outfit, but...” I paled, fearing that he didn’t like them, but the guildmaster shook his head.

“No, I am just surprised. I didn’t expect them to turn out so splendid. These will surely suit Freida perfectly.”

"I see. I'm glad." I sighed in relief over not being rejected, and the guildmaster's eyes shone with a sharp light. "Myne, you really should come to my—"

"We're done here, Myne. Let's go." Benno grabbed Lutz's and my arms and stood up before the guildmaster could even finish his sentence. I followed after him, thinking that it would be fine to leave now that our business was done, but the guildmaster stopped us with some degree of desperation.

"Now now, wait a moment. I would like you to deliver them to Freida directly. She was very happy to have befriended a girl her age. I myself was overjoyed that she finally made a friend in her age group."

Wow... Freida made her first friend, huh? I don't know who it is, but congratulations, I thought to myself, not really thinking about it too hard, when suddenly Benno crouched next to me and whispered into my ear.

"...You ended up friends with that geezer's granddaughter?"

"Bwuh?! Me?! Umm... I wonder about that." I knew that she had developed one-way affection for me, but I didn't think you could call that friendship. But the guildmaster was so clearly happy about his granddaughter making a friend that I didn't want to flatly deny it.

"I believe that she is waiting with snacks prepared so that you can visit at any time."

"...Snacks, you say?" I said on instinct, seconds before Benno flicked my forehead. I knew he was saying "*don't show any openings,*" but I couldn't help but react to the sweet temptation of snacks.

"Perfect. I will take you to Freida." The guildmaster must have been used to carrying Freida, as he picked me up with little effort and left the room.

"Hey, hold it. I'm going too."

"If Myne's going, I'm following."

Benno and Lutz chased after us in a panic, having seen me being kidnapped before their very eyes.

Everyone had basically decided on us going to the guildmaster's house, but it was pretty close to the inner wall and even farther away from my home than Benno's store. To be honest, if we went all the way there, I didn't think I'd have the strength to walk home.

"...Guildmaster, I'm really weak and I don't think I can walk anymore today."

"You don't need to walk. We'll be using a carriage."

"A carriage?!" I hadn't even considered riding in a vehicle. I knew that merchants and farmers had animal-pulled wagons that traveled along the main road, but in my demographic it was normal for each family to have only a single wagon, and only adults ever used them.

Naturally, rubber tires didn't exist here, so to pull a cart carrying a child would take an adult a lot of strength. No children could hope to pull one. Or really, no kid would be allowed to use the family's precious wagon on their own in the first place. We just walked everywhere on foot. That's how it worked.

Not to mention that horses were expensive. Donkeys were largely omnivores, but the feed horses ate was expensive enough that owning one was quite the financial burden. *Ngh... Curse you, rich people.*

While cursing the guildmaster's wealth on the inside, we reached the first floor of the Merchants' Guild and got into his carriage. By the time I snapped out of my fog of envy, Benno and Lutz were both in the carriage and we were all heading to deliver the hair ornaments to Freida together.

I had ridden in a wagon during last year's winter preparations, but this was the first time I was riding a vehicle drawn by an animal. Lutz and I looked eagerly around the carriage, making the guildmaster's lips curve slightly into a smile.

"Ohoh. First time in a carriage, Myne?"

"I've seen them passing by the gate and going along the main road, but nobody Lutz or I know owns a carriage."

The carriage was sized to fit two adults, so there wasn't much space inside. The two adults were sitting in the proper seats, whereas Lutz and I were barely squeezing onto a raised bump on the floor meant for placing luggage. We only managed to fit since we were kids, but even then, it was tight.

"...There's not enough space. Benno, get out."

"In that case, I'll be taking Myne with me."

Benno and the guildmaster glared at each other for a bit, and eventually, the carriage began moving with us all squeezed inside. It bounced along the road so much that it was impossible to sit still. Lutz was safe since he could cling to the handle meant for helping passengers step out, but I had nothing and thus came close to flying off my seat with each bounce.

"Uwaah, aaah!"

"Myne, c'mere." Unable to keep watching, Benno sat me onto his lap and wrapped his arms around my stomach to hold me down so that I wouldn't keep bouncing. The bounces were still enough to send me into the air, though, and if either of us let our guard down there was no doubt that my head would be sent flying up into Benno's jaw for some critical damage. I had known that the carriage would bounce around a lot due to lacking suspension, but I hadn't expected it to be this bad. *Ngggh... Carriages aren't graceful at all.*

"Freida, Myne's brought your hairpins."

“Oh, Myne. Welcome.” Freida walked up to us with a gentle smile, her light-pink hair fluttering.

“Hi again.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Freida. I am Benno. Myne has told me much about you.”

“My my, I wonder what she said?”

...They’re both smiling, but this feels so terrifying! As my back trembled with fear at Benno and Freida’s greeting, Lutz squeezed my hand. I glanced at him and saw that he kinda looked pale. Neither he nor I could yet join the invisible war being held between merchants. I wonder if one day I’ll ever be able to gently smile at someone while sparks fly between us.

“Freida, I have business with Benno here. You can take the hairpins from Myne and pay them.”

“Understood, Grandfather.”

The guildmaster left it at that and headed to his room with Benno, while Lutz and I were taken to the same parlor as last time. Sweet drinks and snacks were immediately brought inside and the table was soon wrapped in a delectable scent.

“I know that we girls love sweet things, so I prepared to have this candy ready at any time in case you visited. Feel free to come play whenever you have the time, Myne.”

“Okay!” I answered with a huge smile, and then Lutz pinched my hand under the table.

...I can’t let her sweet temptation defeat me. I must stay strong. I must... nmmm, they smell so goood...! There were honey-soaked nuts baked atop what looked like thin pizza dough on the table.

“Now then, Myne and Lutz, eat to your heart’s content.”

“Will do!”

Nom nom. There was plenty of honey and it tasted as delicious as it was sweet. What luxurious candy this was. *Am I in heaven?* While thinking about the nut tarts I had eaten in Japan, I indeed ate to my heart’s content. Eating sweet things made me as happy as I expected it to.

“Thanks for the snacks. It was really, really good.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it so much. I’ll inform the chef of her success.”

Woowow... Hear that, Lutz? They have a chef. In other words, when the guildmaster said “she is waiting with snacks prepared,” he meant that she had a chef prepare snacks while she waited doing nothing. Talk about a gap between the rich and poor!

“So, may I see these hairpins you’ve made?”

“Uh huh. But first, I’ll give back the thread we had leftover.”

“...My my, you don’t have to do that.”

"I insist. This thread is too expensive for me to just take." My experience with the guildmaster and Freida had led me to know one thing for certain, from the bottom of my heart: There was nothing scarier than something free. You couldn't let yourself casually take free things. You had to resist their tricks and temptation.

"Now then, I hereby present to you, Miss Freida..."

"Myne, we're friends now, you don't have to be so formal." With a cute, adorable little girl smiling at me like that, I couldn't just say that we weren't friends. I searched for an escape route while floundering.

"But you're my customer."

"I see. Then with this, I am no longer your customer." With a smile, Freida pulled the basket toward her. She then placed six small silvers in front of Lutz and me.

"I've accepted the products and paid their price. Now we can become friends without any hesitation."

With my escape route blocked off completely and Freida's clear unwillingness to accept no for an answer weighing down on me, I gave up and nodded. Really, thinking about it, there wasn't any reason for me to feel bad about making a friend just because she was a little weird and had a deceptive appearance. I was pretty weird myself, too. I should be optimistic and happy about this. *Mmm... I guess I should be a bit more casual around her then.*

"Umm, okay, Freida. Want to take a look at the hairpins?"

"But of course." Freida pinched the handkerchief and pulled it aside. She took a hairpin out of the box and her eyes widened. Her cheeks flushed with joy and a smile arose on her face.

"My my! How splendid! My baptism is in the winter after snow has fallen and there are no flowers or plants to use as hair ornaments, so I've been jealous of kids born in the summer and autumn for all my life. I'm truly glad that I will now be able to adorn my body with vibrant greenery despite the cold winter."

"I'm glad you like them." Speaking of which, I remembered Tuuli mentioning that she had planned on just using a random flower she would find somewhere to decorate her hair. These hair ornaments might end up selling better in the winter.

"Try putting them on. I want to see how they look on your hair, Freida."

"I'm not sure how to put them on. Would you do it for me, Myne?"

"Sure. Lend them here." I stuck the pins of the ornaments by the pieces of string bundling her hair up into the aforementioned twintails. The deep red roses looked good on her light-pink hair, and her air of maturity instantly shot to the next level. *Mhm, mhm. I knew roses were the right idea.*

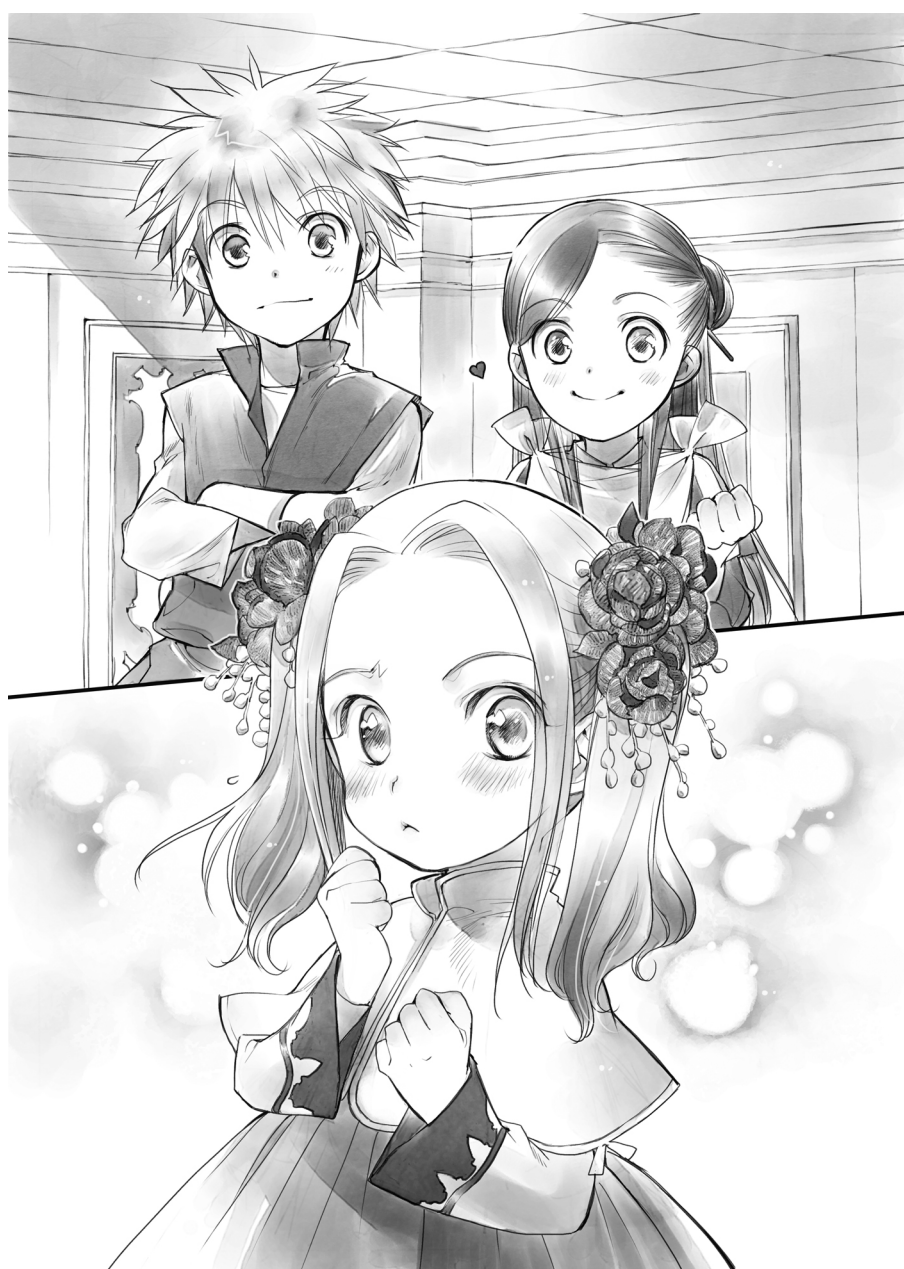
“You look cute, Freida. Almost like a flower fairy.”

“You exaggerate. You’re like my grandfather.” Freida blew off my compliment with a giggle, but I wasn’t exaggerating. Freida looked so cute that I wouldn’t be surprised if someone kidnapped her, assuming they didn’t know about her hobbies.

“I’m not exaggerating. You’re cute and they look really good on you. Don’t you think so, Lutz?”

“Yeah. I didn’t think they’d look this good before I saw them on you. But now I know Myne knows her stuff here. You look crazy cute.”

Freida puffed out her cheeks and blushed a little, making it clear she wasn’t used to being complimented much. It was the kind of thing that made me certain that she really didn’t have any friends or siblings.



At first, situations like this would have made me freeze up, but living here had gotten me a lot more used to functioning in society. I exchanged compliments with my friends and family all the time. I complimented Tuuli to death and Tuuli complimented me too. Even Lutz would compliment me when I did something well, so yeah, I had gotten used to praising others. Freida's behavior was a little weird to me.

"Still though, to think you could make such realistic flowers with mere thread..." Freida took a hairpin out and investigated it thoroughly, just like Benno and the guildmaster had done. Her eyes now had the sharp look of a merchant's.

"It's not that hard. Even I can do it."

"...Discovering the way to do something is very important, Myne." Freida let out a sigh and gave me a surprisingly serious look. "Wives and daughters of wealthier nobles at times wear colorful, tightly woven veils, and some wear true flowers stopped in time with magic. But no one has ever worn a hair ornament sewn like this before."

Maybe this kind of thing was never discovered because nobles, those who bought most luxury goods, just compensated with magic. I hummed to myself in thought and Freida continued to describe how amazing my hairpins were.

"We have much embroidered clothing in our home, but nothing that pops like these flowers. They are all flat. It is not an understatement to say that realistic flowers made of thread such as these are revolutionary," said Freida, making me realize for the first time why Benno had been so dumbfounded at me charging half price.

These hairpins were made with fundamentally new techniques. They stood out among all other hair ornaments in the world, and honestly in almost a bad way. *Um... Have I maybe made a huge mistake here?* As the blood drained from my face, Freida squeezed my hand.

"Myne, it seems that there is surprisingly much about the world you don't know. From now on, I would like you to come visit me to talk, not for business. I'll have plenty of sweet snacks ready for you, so let's have fun chatting as just girls."

"Oh, that sounds like—" *Fun*, I was about to say, before someone pulled my hair. I reflexively turned around and saw Lutz shaking his head with a grim look. *Ngh... That was close. I nearly agreed on the spot after hearing "girls' talk."*

If I had agreed there, it was very possible that Lutz and Benno would be eliminated from my life, so to speak. I fell silent, not knowing what to say, so Lutz answered for me.

"We're gonna be real busy from now on. Sorry, but she won't have the time to come play."

“My, I don’t believe I asked you, Lutz,” said Freida with a smile, but really, I needed Lutz to go with me in the first place.

“Myne’s family doesn’t let her go anywhere outside without me. She can’t come here if I don’t go too.”

“...Ah, I see. There’s no helping it then. You can come with her, Lutz,” agreed Freida with a nod, understanding the situation on the spot likely due to her past of being sick with the devouring.

But Lutz didn’t nod back. He was standing firm in rejecting her offer. “Like I said, we’ll be busy. It’s about time for winter preparations to start for real. Our families will be working together to survive the winter, so nobody’s gonna have the chance to go out alone for some chatting. Plus, once snow starts falling, Myne won’t even be able to go outside. You can understand that, right?”

Indeed. Unlike Freida’s rich family that could just buy all their firewood, we poor people had a really hard time preparing for winter. We needed to collect a lot of wood, make candles, and all sorts of things. It seemed that Freida wasn’t entirely ignorant of that, as she slumped her shoulders and gave up on inviting me over. “...It’ll have to wait until spring, then.”

“Won’t you start apprentice work in the spring, Freida? You gonna be alright?”

“That won’t be an issue. I won’t have apprentice work every day, after all. Once spring comes I’ll have plenty of candy waiting, so please visit when you can.” We would probably be busy with paper-making come spring, but Benno seemed to be hiding that from the guildmaster, so I couldn’t mention it carelessly. I nodded and looked at Lutz.

“You know, Lutz, you didn’t seem too tempted by the candy. Why’s that? Normally you would be all over food.”

“Benno told me to keep my eyes open, and anyway, the parue cakes you make taste a lot better. I like constant good food more than having sweets only sometimes. I don’t want them to steal you away, Myne.”

Lutz, hungry as he tended to be, valued a lifestyle filled with regular meals more than one with occasional sweets. It might be a good idea to thank him for his help here by bringing him a new recipe.

“I’ve never heard of a parue cake before. If that’s a kind of sweet Myne developed, I would quite like to taste one.”

“Wha? Um, well...” I naturally couldn’t offer a rich girl like Freida a meal made from parue leftovers, known to most as bird food. Her doting grandfather would probably go mad with anger, and the chef likely taking care of her diet would flip out.

“Are you saying you will cook for Lutz, but not for me?” Freida

lowered her eyes in sorrow and a critical tone came into her voice, which made me worry a little, but parue cakes seriously weren't fit for a rich girl.

"The ingredients are just a bit iffy... I don't think they're something a high-class girl like you would want to eat, Freida."

"This isn't fair," said Freida, pouting so hard her lips were pointing straight out.

But even with pouting that cute, reality wouldn't change. I didn't have any food that I could bear to let Freida eat. Not to mention that I would need help making the food. There wasn't much I could do on my own. The only reason I thought up so many new recipes for Lutz was because there were four boys there willing to work hard to eat. Making something for Freida would be out of the question without proper ingredients and help. Anyone hoping for strength out of me, a girl suffering from the devouring, or Freida, a rich girl who once suffered from the devouring, just didn't understand how things worked.

"Ummm, how about, when spring comes, we make candy together using the ingredients you have in the kitchen? With your chef helping us. That way I don't have to worry about cooking with low quality ingredients and we'll have someone strong to help us. What do you think?"

"My, how wonderful! It's a promise." Once we settled on when we would make sweets together, a knock came on the door, followed by Benno and the guildmaster entering the room.

"Hey, you three done here? We're leaving."

"Uh huh. And, um, Mr. Benno. About this money..." The six small silvers Freida paid us was actually a lot of money. I was honestly scared to carry them on my own. When I held them out to Benno, he looked at the guildmaster.

"Would you mind us borrowing this room for a minute? I want to finish sorting this money out before we leave."

"Certainly. I'm the one who forced them to come here in the first place. Take your time." Benno waited for Freida and the guildmaster to leave the room, then took the silvers and started lining them up against the table.

"Three of the small silvers go to me for the handling fee and materials, the rest go to you two. If only you hadn't made the second one half price, both of you would've gotten two small silvers. Too bad, huh?"

"...No, this is fine. If we made more money on these hairpins than we already have, I would feel bad selling the future hairpins for cheap," I said, making Benno snort and take out his bag of money, which functioned as this world's equivalent to a wallet.

“How do you want to split the money? Will you take it all home?”

“I’ll store the small silver in the Merchants’ Guild and take home the five large coppers.”

“Same.”

As if having expected us to do that, Benno took out his guild card and the large coppers. I pressed my card to his, wrapped the five coppers in a handkerchief, and put them in my tote bag.

“The guildmaster said he’d give you a ride to the Guild in his carriage. Go along with him.”

“What about you, Mr. Benno?”

“I’ll walk to my store. That carriage is too small for all of us. Come see me tomorrow afternoon, since the thread’s being delivered then. We’ve gotta decide on a price for the hairpins.”

What had Benno and the guildmaster talked about in there? He seemed a lot less on guard than he used to be.

Winter Handiwork

“Hey, Myne. Why are you saving the small silvers with the Guild every time? Why not just bring it all home?” asked Lutz suddenly. We were on our way home from the Merchants’ Guild after leaving the carriage. “I’m doing the same thing ’cause I figure there’s some point to it if you’re doing it, but... I always thought I’d take all the money I made back home, so it feels kinda like I’m doing a bad thing...”

The idea of saving money was a distant one to poor commoners who barely scraped by as it was. At most they would start stashing a bit of money away during autumn for winter preparations, and that was a lot different from registering in the Guild to store money there. Naturally what parents did became common sense to children, and most of them brought their apprentice earnings back home to help their family.

“I’m saving for the next time we need to invest in a startup fund.”

“Say what now? Startup fund?” said Lutz, tilting his head in confusion, so I tried to explain it to him in the simplest possible terms using our own experience as an example.

“Remember how hard it was to get a single nail when we wanted to make paper and didn’t have any tools, money, or even adults to help us?”

It wasn’t too long ago that we asked Otto for help and ended up with Benno yelling at us. Lutz, remembering that, nodded with a bitter expression.

“We were lucky enough that Benno bought my (simple all-in-one shampoo) and paid all the money we needed for stuff, but you understand how expensive all our tools were, right? In order to start something new, you need a lot of money.”

“A pot, lumber, ashes, thread, bamboo work... Yeah, that must have been really expensive.” Thanks to all the places we’d been going to lately, Lutz had come to understand the prices of things sold in stores, not just stands at the market. He paled at the thought of how much starting up our paper-making venture would have cost.

“So, I’m saving up my money for next time. Benno said he was done paying for our stuff once we finished the prototypes, right? If we want to expand our paper-making process by buying more tools, or if we want to start something new at all, we’ll need a lot of money. Everything costs money. Even moving on to making books will need

new tools.”

“So it’s all for the future, huh...?” I peered at Lutz as he made an expression that made it seem like he kinda agreed and kinda didn’t. He must not have realized that he had a much more pressing and important reason to save money than I did. The thought must have been escaping him.

After thinking for a few moments, I started to speak slowly. “I don’t really want to say this, and I don’t even want to think about it, but... if your family still won’t let you become a merchant after your baptism, what will you do? Have you thought about your future...?”

After scrunching up his face miserably, Lutz murmured in a weak voice, “...I was thinking I’d ask Benno to let me be a live-in apprentice.”

“That’s all you could do if you want to be a merchant. I’m glad you didn’t say you would give up.” I smiled, which made Lutz let out a little sigh of relief. It would take a lot of guts for a kid his age to run away from home, and I was sure he was still debating it in his head. But regardless, he was fighting for his dream. And fighting for his dream would take money, of course.

“But think about it, Lutz. After you’ve run away from home and become a live-in apprentice, there’ll be time before you get your first pay, and you’ll need to both survive until then and afford your apprentice clothes. Your life will be a lot different depending on if you have your own money you can do anything with.”

Lutz’s head shot up, as if he finally understood. We made eye contact and I nodded. “There’s nothing wrong with saving the money you earned yourself. You might feel guilty since everyone else is using all their pay to survive, but you’re not even old enough to be working yet and you’ve already brought home thirteen large coppers in just five days. You’re bringing home more money than Ralph is, and he’s an apprentice, right? So it’s fine. It’s all okay.”

“Right... I am making more than Ralph, huh,” said Lutz, grinning with pride. Ralph had just begun his apprentice work and thus probably made around eight to ten large coppers a month, which was far less than what we had earned already. “Thanks, Myne. I feel a lot better now.”

“I’m glad,” I said with a smile before Lutz suddenly turned around and crouched. “What’re you doing, Lutz?”

“I’ll carry you on my back. You must be pretty tired by now, huh? You’re looking kinda sick,” said Lutz, making me reflexively touch my cheeks. They didn’t feel hot, so I wasn’t suffering from a fever yet.

“...I look sick?”

“Not too much, but we’re going to see Benno again tomorrow, so you shouldn’t push yourself. Don’t forget, Myne, my most important

job is keeping you healthy.”

“...Okay. Thanks.” It was true that we had walked around so much today that I was getting exhausted. If Lutz was getting worried, then I was definitely close to being in a dangerous state.

I got on Lutz’s back and he carried me home. I naturally climbed the stairs on my own, but when I started falling over on the way there, he took my hand and helped me up. To be honest, the last set of stairs before my floor were the hardest part of any trip.

“I’m home, Mom.”

“Oh, hello Lutz. It’s rare for you to come all the way up here. Is Myne feeling okay?”

“We were just gonna show Benno the hairpins, but we met with the guildmaster and ended up going to his place. Since he wanted us to deliver the hairpins ourselves, I mean. Thanks to that, Myne ended up pretty tired.”

“I see. Thanks as always, Lutz. You help us more than you know,” said Mom while putting a middle copper into Lutz’s hand. Which reminded me that I had my own money to hand over.

“Oh, that’s right. Here Mom, before I forget.”

“Myne, what in the world did you do?” Mom paled as she saw the five large coppers I had. She froze in place with her eyes wide open, having naturally not expected the hairpins to be worth that much money.

“This is part of what we were paid for Freida’s hairpins. Didn’t I mention that they were paying a lot since nobody else sells them?”

“You did, but I still didn’t expect this much money...”

Sorry, Mom. I guess I really shouldn’t tell her that this is less than half of what we were paid, and that I’m keeping a small silver for myself.

“Is she telling the truth, Lutz?”

“She is, Mrs. Effa. I have just as much since I helped her make them. We split the pay halfway,” said Lutz, showing Mom his own large coppers. That was enough for her to believe us and she sighed in relief. *Um, Mom? Do you not trust your daughter at all?*

“Also, Benno told us to see him next afternoon, so we’re going to the store again tomorrow. Try and get her to rest as much as possible.”

“Thank you so much, Lutz.” Mom shut the door after seeing Lutz off, then sent me to bed with her eyebrows arched a little with anger. “How many times have I told you not to push yourself? But in any case, you certainly sold those hairpins for a lot of money, didn’t you?”

“Mhm. Freida’s rich and we used expensive thread, not to mention that we made two hairpins instead of just one. Also, since this is a busy time for winter preparations, they paid us extra. Nobody else would have paid us this much.”

“I see. They were considerate since now is a busy time for us, then.” It looked like my Mom was now imagining Freida and the guildmaster to be honorable rich citizens who were considerate even to us poor folk. She would probably never meet them in real life, so I felt no need to crush her dreams with reality.

Mom, having finally came to terms with her child coming home with a ridiculous amount of money, left the bedroom to start preparing supper. Now alone in the bedroom, I realized that I really had been pushing myself pretty far, and started drifting off as soon as I rested my head on the pillow. I ended up falling into a deep sleep and missing supper entirely.

When I woke up, it was morning. Since we were visiting Benno’s store in the afternoon, I was basically stuck in bed until then. Probably due to how much I had been walking around lately, my body felt really heavy and sluggish despite how well I had slept. It was clear to everyone that I was on the verge of getting sick with a fever, and even after starting winter prep, my family wouldn’t let me help them.

“Stay in bed, Myne. You’ve been working too hard lately. You trying to make more than me, huh?” said Dad while checking the window shutters.

Mom and Tuuli, spreading out and drying the winter blankets and carpet, were no different.

“You’re going to Benno’s today, aren’t you? You’ll collapse on the way there if you don’t rest right now.”

“You can’t help much during winter preparations anyway, so conserve your energy for where it’s useful.”

None of them were about to let me leave the bed. Having no other choice, I snuggled up underneath the blankets and watched my family work busily. *Hmph... I think I would be at least a little helpful since I learned a lot about winter preparations last year, but sure, whatever.*

They were probably being overprotective since I fell into a deep sleep right after coming home with five large coppers. Inside the house I couldn’t do much, but in the span of five days I had brought home thirteen large coppers, then passed out and missed supper. I could imagine that they interpreted that as me overworking myself. I guess that wasn’t too far from the truth, since simply walking around was pretty hard work for me.

When fourth bell rang, signifying noon, I bundled up in warm clothing and left with my tote bag. I climbed down the stairs and saw Lutz, who immediately grimaced.

“Myne, you’re not looking too good. Maybe I should go to Benno’s alone?”

“I think it’s because we’ve been so busy lately. But still, Benno

said he wants to determine the price of the hairpins today, so I need to go. If it were just the thread you could get it on your own, but I really want to be there when deciding on the price.”

“...Yeah, the price is a bit, uh, much for me. I still don’t get how that stuff works.” Since Lutz still didn’t know all his numbers, deciding on the price would be too much for him. It was especially important that I go today and negotiate with Benno on the price of the hairpins. “Alright. At least let me carry you, then.”

“Huh? I couldn’t make you do that. You just carried me home yesterday...”

“I’ll be carrying all the thread on the way back and that’ll probably take all I’ve got. You should save your strength.”

“Aww. But I was in bed all morning, I’m fine.”

“At times like these, you never know when you’re fine.”

And at times like these, you’re so stubborn that you never give in, I murmured to myself internally while getting on Lutz’s back. I myself had barely grown at all, but it felt like Lutz’s back was even bigger than yesterday. It was a little frustrating that despite he was growing so much more than me despite being the same age, even taking my sickness into account.

“Lutz? Is Myne not feeling well?” After seeing Lutz carrying me on his back, Mark’s eyes widened and he quickly walked up to us. Mark had grown sensitive to my health. I had actually traumatized him by collapsing unconscious in front of him, and suffice to say, I felt pretty bad about it.

“...She’s been leaving her house every day and that’s taking its toll on her. She’ll probably end up in bed for a while starting tonight. So we want to finish our business here as soon as possible.”

“Understood.” Mark gave a single nod and guided us to Benno’s room. “Sir, Myne and Lutz have arrived.”

“Let’m in.”

Mark opened the door with a creak and walked in with us. “I have been told that Myne’s health is poor right now. It would be wise to finish this meeting as soon as possible.”

“Got it. Take a seat, you two.” Once we reached the table and sat down, Benno started discussing our winter handiwork right away. He told us the price of the thread, I estimated how many hair ornaments we would be able to make from this amount of thread, and from that we decided the price.

“Mr. Benno, I don’t want to make the selling price of these hair ornaments too high. We’re using cheap thread here and I would like for a lot of people to buy them.”

“I understand how you feel, but I’m not gonna sell them cheap from the start. Their market price will drop as more of them enter the

market and starting cheap isn't gonna help that. We'll make a lot more money starting high and working our way down. Three large coppers should be good."

That was just expensive enough that even my family could afford one if we tightened our belts for a bit. The idea was that poor families would be able to just barely justify it by having sisters pass it down over the years, and over time we would slowly drop the price.

"That seems fair. Okay." I nodded and the conversation moved on to our share of the profit.

"For each hairpin, after taking out the handling and materials fee, you will earn five middle coppers. That's me being generous, since you're the only ones that can make these and it's a new kind of handiwork that's never been done before."

"Five middle coppers when you're being generous?! I knew you were overcharging Freida!" If we had been working with Benno's initial price, we would be making around five small silvers for every two hairpins. That was a hundred times more money, literally.

"That was the price the geezer asked for himself, so who cares? He did it to himself."

"...Okay, how much are things made as winter handiwork usually worth?" I had helped Tuuli make baskets last winter but was never paid for my efforts, so I never really thought about how much each basket was worth.

"We merchants take our handling fee, and then the bosses of carpenter shops or sewing shops take their handling fee too, so usually the people making this stuff get a single middle copper per product if they're lucky. Usually it's less. You're making a little more since we're not dealing with the boss of any shops, but still."

"Bwuuh?! Not even a single middle copper? Isn't that way too cheap?!" My immediate reaction was shock, but after a moment I remembered that homemade crafts were pretty cheap even in Japan. Bead straps, for instance, were generally only priced at a hundred yen or less. With that in mind, a single product being only worth a middle copper or less wasn't odd at all. We were making a killing with our five middle coppers.

"Usually only the boss of a shop has the right to buy and sell products like that. Profit will change a lot depending on how large of a handling fee that boss takes. Don't you have experience with this kind of thing? I figured you did since you're the one who brought up making hairpins as your winter handiwork," said Benno, which made me think back to last year's handiwork.

"Last year I helped my older sister Tuuli with her handiwork. But I just made the stuff without knowing how much they were worth, how much of a profit they were making, or how much a handling fee

the boss was taking. I wasn't paid anything. Wait, speaking of which, don't you need to be registered with the Merchants' Guild to sell things you've made? Is my mom registered?" My mom had taken our baskets off somewhere, but I had never heard of her visiting the Merchants' Guild. She even seemed interested when I mentioned going there myself.

"What, does your mother run a market stand?"

"No, she just works at a dye workshop."

"Then whatever you did was probably handiwork her workplace gave out. Since the boss is paying them for work done, the craftspeople themselves don't have to register with the Guild. Only the boss has to register and they'll do all the selling themselves."

Apparently, handiwork given by a workplace was considered a part of work, so the workers themselves didn't have to register with the Merchants' Guild. But they did have to be registered with the respective guild related to their craft.

"So basically, my handiwork last year was given to my mom by her workplace. She left it to Tuuli and then I helped her."

"What'd you make?"

"I made baskets like these. They were pretty simple since I didn't have much experience making them, but I had a lot of spare time to spend on them, so some ended up looking really nice." I held up my tote bag with pride and for some reason Benno grimaced, rubbing his temples.

"...You again?"

"Bwuh?" *What does he mean, me again? You know, I get the feeling I've seen him grimace like this several times before. Did I maybe do something wrong again?*

"I remember seeing some fancy baskets in the middle of all the normal ones being sold last spring. For handiwork, you get paid based on quantity, not quality, so most people made pretty crappy baskets to make as much money as possible. Yours stood out a lot compared to them."

"NOOOOOOOO!" I had put some extra effort into the baskets since I had the time and Tuuli wanted to learn, never expecting in my wildest dreams that they would end up standing out in the marketplace.

"I went all the way to the workshop to ask who made them, but they had gathered all the baskets at once and didn't keep track of which worker made which."

"Whew! That's a relief." I was, in fact, self-aware of my own weirdness and tried my hardest to blend in, but I got the feeling that wasn't really working out.

"People making their own baskets naturally put more effort into

it, so your bag didn't stick out to me, and it lacked the decoration for me to make the connection. Y'know, all the odd things I've come across this past half a year have led back to you, Myne."

As I thought of the fancy baskets, hairpins, shampoo, and plant paper, I couldn't help but grab onto my head in agony. Benno was making me realize that nothing I had done was the work of someone trying to blend in. I felt so awkward that I couldn't help but give a small apology. "...Um, sorry."

"Eh, don't worry about it. More importantly, I see that you have a habit of putting more effort into things when you're bored. Listen up. When making these hairpins, follow the same design you used for Tuuli's and don't change it up. This isn't negotiable. Understand?"

I hadn't expected the bags to stand out like they did and I didn't want the same to happen with the hair ornaments. Keeping the design identical for all of them should dodge that problem entirely. "Okay. They'll be different colors, but they'll all be the same design."

"Alright, that should be about it. Oh wait, one more thing. You said you wanted to study over the winter, right? Here, I'll lend you this. Take a look once you get home."

"...What is it?" I started to look at the wooden card Benno gave me, but he squeezed my cheek.

"I said look at it after you get home! Understand?"

"Yesh!"

"Sheesh. You can give it back once your fever's gone down. Get home as soon as possible. Lutz, don't take your eyes off this idiot. I get the feeling she'll try to read the card on her way home and end up in an accident."

I, remembering the time in my Urano days when I got hit by a car due to reading a book on my way home from school, kept my mouth shut and looked away.

Mark had put the thread we'd ordered into a box, which Lutz carried on the way home. We left with Mark watching on, looking worried. As we took our time walking slowly, I started to talk to Lutz about something I wanted to discuss before I ended up bedridden.

"Hey, Lutz. About our share of the hairpin money..."

"Yeah?"

"The flower parts take a lot more time to make, so would you be fine if I take three out of the five middle coppers?"

"Sure. Heck, I'd be fine taking just one of the coppers."

A one and four split more accurately reflected the amount of work being done, but my reasoning for the two and three split laid elsewhere. "That'll make the math a lot harder for you, so let's go with two and three."

"Math?"

“Uh huh. I think we should hire our families to do this work with a pay of two mid coppers for each flower part, one mid copper for each pin part. We can split the other two mid coppers.”

“Huh? Our family?” Lutz looked confused, so I continued.

“Mmm, given how fast my family works, I think we would only be able to make about thirty hairpins per month at best. We don’t want a bunch of leftover pins, so I thought about how you could ask your family to make thirty pins a month and take a handling fee for them.”

“You want me to do this so I can be a merchant?” Lutz understood what I was getting at after remembering how I had described the difference between a worker and a merchant.

“That’s right. Don’t you want to try copying Benno? You’ll have to study hard over the winter if you want your apprenticeship to go well, and that won’t be possible if you’re spending all your time making pins. Though you would get more money if you did.”

I understood that it didn’t feel great to take money from your family, but if you weren’t willing to do business with them, then becoming a merchant would be a lot harder.

After hearing my explanation, Lutz glared at the ground for a bit, then his head shot up. “...I’ll give it a shot.”

The thread needed to be stored in my place, so Lutz carried it up the stairs for me. My family was naturally surprised to see me come home with a bunch of thread, and thus stopped their work to take a look.

“Lutz, why all the thread?”

Mom... Why are you asking that to Lutz and not me, your daughter?

Peeved by the difference in trust Mom felt toward us, I began to explain. “This is thread to make hairpins. Benno bought it for us so we could sell the completed products to him. This is going to be my winter handiwork, so please don’t use it on other things, okay?”

“Mhm. Thanks, Lutz. Have some of this, if you’d like.” Mom handed a tiny jar of freshly made jam to Lutz. He took it with his eyes shining and raced home.

“I’ll take this to the storeroom. You go ahead and sleep, Myne.” Dad carried off the basket and pushed me into bed.

“Aww. At least let me wash myself first. I didn’t get a chance to yesterday and I’m feeling gross since I went out yesterday.”

Tuuli called over, “I was just heating up some water and I want to get clean too, so let’s wipe each other down together.”

“Thanks, Tuuli.”

Tuuli and I had been washing each other for about a year. By this point she started to feel uncomfortable after about three days of not washing. She prepared the bucket of bathing water near the hearth,

the warmest part of our house, and talked to me while wiping herself down.

“A year ago you were doing a bunch of weird things I didn’t understand, and now you’re going out and working for money. I don’t know what to think about all this, really.”

“Are you making baskets again this year?” I asked Tuuli while wringing a wet towel above the bucket.

She moved her braid aside and washed behind her neck while answering. “The handiwork Mom’s job gives pays more than my job, so yeah. I was planning to start cutting the wood and peeling off the bark for it.”

“Wait, what? You don’t have to do your job’s winter handiwork?” Wasn’t it mandatory work given by the boss? I had thought from Benno’s explanation that people had a quota they had to fill. I tilted my head in confusion and Tuuli giggled.

“It’s just a side job to earn a little extra money. Some people make a lot of extra and others are so busy making clothes for their family they can’t spare the time, so it’s not mandatory or anything.”

“Ohhh, okay. Everyone’s in a different situation.” I had been planning to ask my family for their help after they finished their quota, but if there wasn’t a quota in the first place, maybe Tuuli could help me from the start. I looked at her and smiled. “My handiwork is going to be making more of those hairpins. I can get two middle coppers for each complete flower part I make for them.”

“What?! Really?! That’s a lot of money. Can I make them too?”

“Mhm, let’s do it together,” I said, causing Tuuli to start jumping for joy. Her green eyes were shining as she planned to make tons of flowers and earn a lot of money.

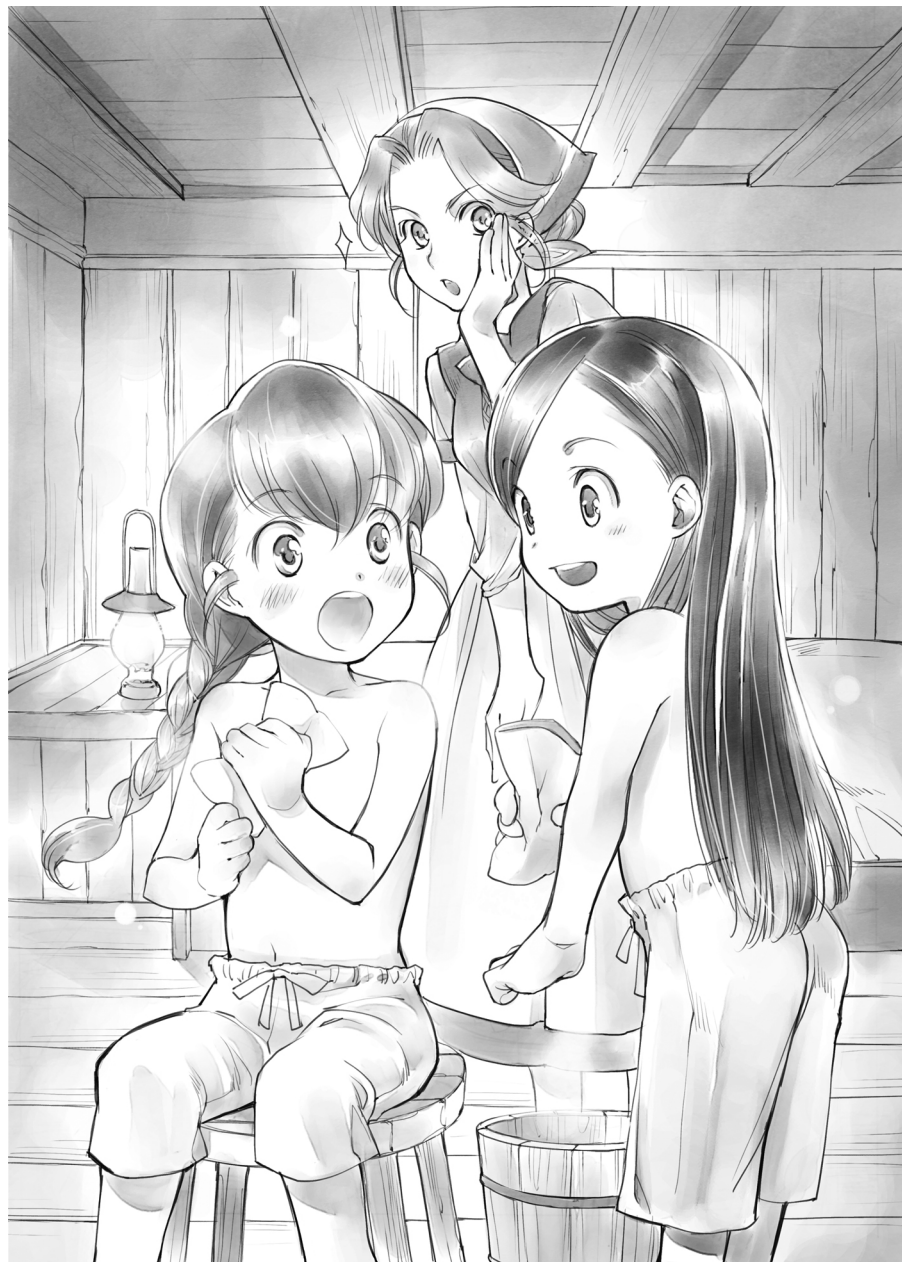
“Hey, hey, Myne. What do I need to do to get ready?”

“Benno gave me all the thread I need and Lutz is making the pin parts, so nothing really. We just need thin needles to sew them.”

“That’s really easy.” Tuuli started to laugh, but then she froze in place and pointed behind me, blinking rapidly. I turned around to see Mom, who was standing still with her hand on her cheek. She was thinking really hard about something.

“Myne. Could I join you two after finishing your special dress?”

...Um, Lutz? My mom looks really pumped about starting this. We might need more pins.



Lutz's Training Curriculum

Just as Lutz predicted, I caught a fever while I sat around in bed. It was a slight fever born from exhaustion, so the worst part of it was just my body feeling heavy. It wasn't like the devouring heat that came close to eating me alive, so it would probably get better after a little bit of rest.

Or so I thought, before three entire days passed. I was getting annoyed at the unending fever, but I would just get yelled at if I left the bed, so I had no choice but to keep lying around despite feeling groggy from sleeping too much. *Aaaaah, I'm so boooooored.*

It was pig day. Unlike last year, my family trusted me just enough to leave me home alone, so they left early in the morning without me. They had left a sandwich for lunch and a bunch of cups of water by the bed, so I didn't end up hungry or thirsty. I could have gotten out of bed if I wanted to, but I knew that would just make the fever last longer, so my only real choice was to stay quiet in bed. But without anyone to talk to I was just so, so, so bored. *I wish I had a boooooook...*

Although I had plenty of failed experimental paper lying around, I hadn't gotten the opportunity to do anything with it, so it was just packed in the bottom of the wooden box I put my clothes into. Reason being, we had been really busy ever since completing the experimental paper, and I wanted to take my time with my first book so it would be as good as possible. Most importantly, though, the paper was experimental and thus varied wildly in quality, size, and so on. I had paper nearing perfection and paper so bad it would fall apart if I picked it up too fast. Some paper was so thin and flimsy I could see through it, some paper was so hard it would crack if I held it too hard.

It'd be easy to just use the paper that ripped a little when we were peeling it off the drying board, but it had big holes in it and it was a little hard for me to cut off just the usable parts with a knife. I wished I had two thin, sharp blades that could be used like scissors.

Making books with paper like this would take a lot of time. It seemed that this winter would be a busy one for me. *...Oh! That reminds me, it's not a book, but Benno gave me that board thing to read.* I remembered that Benno had given me a wooden board and told me to read it after getting home. Reading while in bed wouldn't pose any problem at all. I got out of bed, opened the box containing my clothes, and took the wooden board about the size of an A4 sheet of paper out

of my tote bag. I then read it while lying in bed.

“...This is a curriculum for training new apprentices.” On the board was written the bare essentials that a newly hired apprentice had to learn. If split into six broad sections, it would look like this:

Know the customary greetings and how to dress well.

Be capable of writing the alphabet and all numbers.

Know how to use a calculator.

Have a reasonable grasp on how to count money.

Memorize which products our store deals in.

Memorize the names of our suppliers.

“Mmm, out of these, I think the only things we can learn together over winter are writing, math, and counting money. I think every apprentice will have to learn those last two things, so they shouldn’t be our priority,” I murmured to myself while setting up a study plan for the winter.

Now then. I wondered how many letters and numbers Lutz had memorized by heart by now. It was easy to forget if you didn’t use them after first learning them. Once I confirmed how much he knew, I could start teaching him again starting with what he had forgotten. Maybe instead of using example sentences, I could teach him to write supply orders and letters about meeting reservations? Those would involve words he would use for work, so learning them now wouldn’t hurt.

To be honest, I also only knew words related to work, for the most part. There were no dictionaries in this world and I had learned to read and write from Otto, someone trying to train me into his assistant accountant, Benno, a merchant, and Mark, the former’s right hand man. Thanks to them, I had learned a lot of practical words that related to business and the like. But I didn’t know a lot of common verbs and nouns.

“I know how to add and subtract with a calculator, but I’ll have to ask Mark how to multiply and divide with it.” I could teach Lutz math through writing on my slate, but I needed to learn to use the calculator as well if I didn’t want to stick out among the other apprentices. If possible, I wanted to be capable of everything the others were.

“I want to teach Lutz elementary school math up to a third grade level, but that’ll be hard without a textbook or worksheets. I should prioritize teaching him to count numbers and convert numbers into units of money, starting with thorough lessons on one-digit addition and subtraction. Once that’s done, I can move on to trying to get him to at least understand the concept of multiplication and division... Well, I might need more than this winter for that.”

Naturally, teaching three years’ worth of math in a single winter

was a bit much, even when cutting out the fat and focusing on core principles. I let out a sigh and felt the heat within me stir. Feeling the pressure of the devouring heat trying to force its way out, I tensed up my temples and gritted my teeth.

...Get back down, I wasn't calling for you. I pushed it down into me, visualizing a cover being put onto a pot, and let out another sigh.

It hadn't lasted long, but pushing down the devouring heat had made me hungry. I picked up the sandwich my family left for me and took a big bite, chewing while thinking about dressing well and greeting customers.

"This category's the biggest problem for me. Dress well, and know the customary greetings. I don't know how 'well' they want us to dress, and neither I nor Lutz know what kind of specific phrases merchants use when greeting each other, customers, and so on."

I knew from seeing Benno's employees and those on the third floor of the Merchants' Guild that we would have to buy new clothes for work. But I would have to check with Benno to see how expensive those clothes were.

He would also have to tell us about the greetings. I knew it wasn't customary in this world to bow one's head, but I didn't know what they did instead. Up until now I had just been bluffing my way through with a smile. That said, it didn't seem like Benno or the guildmaster had exchanged any special greetings.

I started drifting off while looking at the board Benno gave me, and when I opened my eyes, my family was home and carrying the butchered pig meat into our winter storage room.

"Welcome home."

"Oh, you're awake? How's your fever?"

"...It's gone down, I think." I felt pretty good after waking up, so I could assume that my fever had gone down. Tomorrow would probably be spent inside to test the waters, but after that I would finally be free.

A day passed. Lutz, wearing a scavenging basket on his back, came to visit me before heading to the forest. We couldn't talk for long, despite me feeling better, since I had to stay in bed to make sure I would recover, but still I was really happy to see him.

"Heya, Myne. I heard your fever's gone down? Tuuli told me when we met up downstairs."

"Uh huh, it went down last night. After another day of rest, I should be able to walk around."

"Alright. I was worried, it's been a while since you've been stuck in bed for that long." Both Lutz and my family had gotten very worried about me since, indeed, it had been some time since one of my fevers had lasted for multiple days.

“Heard you couldn’t go see the pigs get butchered this year, either.”

“Aaah, well, I can’t help it in this season.” I had gotten more used to seeing animals get butchered, but I didn’t exactly consider pig day an exciting holiday like my family did. In fact, I thought it was pretty lucky that it came and went while I was sick in bed. “I looked at the board Benno gave us the other day and made a study plan for us. Do you think we could go to Benno’s tomorrow? I want to give the board back and buy a calculator.”

“...Oh yeah. What was written on it, anyway?” Lutz snapped to attention and leaned forward, remembering that Benno had lent us a board. He was ready to listen.

“It’s about what his apprentices learn. How many letters and numbers do you remember?”

“All of the ones I’ve been taught?” he replied, as if it were completely natural.

I was so surprised that my eyes widened. “Wha? Really?! You didn’t forget them even though you never use them?!”

“...I don’t get many chances to learn that kinda stuff, and I didn’t want to forget what I already knew, so I wrote them on the ground with my fingers to practice. Once you got me the slate, I started practicing with that instead.”

“Wow, Lutz, that’s great! Good job! So clever!”

Lutz was a harder worker than I had imagined. Or maybe my perspective had just been biased by my upbringing where public schools were natural and I could easily get my hands on any information I wanted. At no point in my life had I worried about forgetting something. If I forgot, I could just read another book. I could relearn anything as long as I remembered which book I read about it in. There was no need to memorize every little thing.

“I’m not that great. You’re a lot more impressive than me, Myne. You can read all those big numbers.”

“Okay, then I’ll teach you how to read big numbers. Grab my slate for me, okay?”

One, ten, a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand... I taught him the words for increasingly big numbers. He could read up to a hundred easily since those numbers were used in the market, but the rest were a mystery to him. I pointed at the slate, counting along the factors of ten, and Lutz soon joined me. Once I went over each unit several times, I wrote a random number on my slate.

“Okay, quiz time. How would you write six-hundred twelve-thousand four-hundred and thirteen?”

“Uuuh, it’s one, ten, hundred, thousand, ten thousand, hundred thousand, million, ten million, so...” Lutz folded his arms with a pretty

serious look, and before I knew it he could count up to ten million. He could focus harder or perhaps had a better memory than your average person, but either way, he was smarter than I expected. He would probably learn a lot over the winter.

...If he gets smart, I'll lose the one advantage I have over him. I thought, getting depressed on the inside, when suddenly Tuuli came back with a bucket of water.

"Wait, Lutz?! Weren't you going to the forest? Everybody's already left!"

"Woah! Sorry Myne, I've gotta go. Thanks for teaching me." Lutz hurriedly stood up and ran off. At his speed, he would probably catch up with the others before they reached the gate. I waved as he left.

The day passed, and my parents gave me permission to go outside, so Lutz and I left to go see Benno in the afternoon, when he was the least busy. The door was shut and a guard was standing in front of it.

"I guess it's still noon break."

"Want to go back to the plaza and sit around for a while? Standing for too long's not going to do you any good."

"That sounds good. I think I should try to sit more often today."

We started to kill time by talking, but the guard recognized us by now and gestured us forward. "I'll ask the boss if I can let you two in. Wait here for a bit, please."

"Thank you."

The guard went into the store, then returned in a snap and held the door wide open for us. He led us through the dim store, darkened by the drawn curtains blocking sunlight, and opened the door to an inner room for us. The room was bright thanks to the open windows and a sizable fire in the fireplace. Benno, who had apparently been working, set aside his pen and ink to stand up.

"Feeling better, Myne?"

"Mhm. We came to give the board back. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions about it?"

"Nah, go ahead. I've got something to talk about too, but you can start," said Benno, gesturing us toward the same table as always.

"Thank you for lending me this. Using it, I've managed to put together a study plan for us."

"Oh?"

"But there were a few things I wanted to ask about. I know that we need to dress well, but what do you specifically mean by 'well'? Also, neither of us know if merchants have specific greetings and so on that they use."

Benno nodded and looked at us. "Basically, neither of you look too dirty despite being commoners who live near the south gate, so you just need work clothes and new pairs of shoes. You'll be able to

buy everything you need with about ten small silvers, so if you start saving now, you should have enough by summer.”

“Ten small silvers... Glad I copied Myne and saved my money,” murmured Lutz, seeming dazed. All of Lutz’s clothes were hand-me-downs sewn by his own mother, so it was probably shocking for him to hear that he would need to pay at minimum ten small silvers just for clothes and shoes. It was surprising to me too, but I knew that clothes here weren’t mass produced, so I had expected that made-to-order clothes would be about that expensive. And expensive as they were, we would be able to afford them if we worked hard and made enough paper by spring.

“Moving on. You’ve got to work on how you talk to people, Lutz. If you don’t learn to talk more politely like Myne does, I won’t be able to let you interact with customers,” said Benno, making Lutz freeze. It was hard to learn polite language without having people around you who used it. I tried thinking about who spoke the most politely out of anyone who Lutz knew.

“I think you could learn a lot from how Mr. Mark speaks.”

“...Eeeh, that feels kinda weird.”

I could imagine that changing the manner in which you spoke could feel a little uncomfortable and strange, like changing your very personality. But if he didn’t do that, he wouldn’t be allowed to interact with customers. Especially in a store like Benno’s which was increasingly shifting its demographic toward the nobility. Interacting with noble society forced one to dress well, speak well, and uphold proper manners.

“Don’t worry. You can do it if you try. Mr. Benno’s all gruff and mean when he’s with us, but he’s perfectly polite with customers, so all you have to do is learn to shift around based on who you’re talking to.”

Benno hadn’t been particularly polite with even the Merchants’ Guild’s guildmaster, but I knew he could do it if he wanted to. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have made it this far as a merchant.

“You won’t have to be polite with me or your family or anyone like that. And you’ve heard me talk differently when I’m with Benno, the guildmaster, and stuff, right? Did you think I sounded weird?”

“...Now that you mentioned it, nah. You talked so normally I never thought it was weird.”

If you switched on a dime, nobody would really notice you changed at all. It might feel weird at first, but over time, you get used to it.

“So how about you learn how Mr. Mark talks and mimic him just when you’re working? You can start by saying sir, ma’am, and so on.” I offered some examples and Lutz nodded.

“Alright, yes sir.”

“No, no! Sir is for boys, not girls!”

“Pff! Ahahahaha!” Benno, who had been listening in on our exchange, burst into laughter and hit the table while choking out laughs. Tears formed in his eyes and he held his stomach while laughing like an idiot. “Pfhaha, I dunno how far you’ll get with him over the winter, but hey, good luck.”

I glared at Benno, but he didn’t even flinch. I clenched my fist and swore with an iron resolve that I would get Lutz speaking politely in no time. Which reminded me to ask about something.

“Oh, right. Mr. Benno.”

“Yeah?”

“I would like a calculator for us to learn with. We won’t ever get used to using one without practice.” Mark’s fingers danced as he used the calculator, moving rapidly without pause as they enacted his thoughts without a single hitch or error. We probably wouldn’t reach his level with it, but even abacuses needed practice to learn.

“A calculator, huh... If you don’t mind a used one from my store, I can sell you one for six large coppers. You just want one for the both of you, yeah?”

“Yes, please.” We tapped guild cards with Benno, each of us giving him three large coppers. He then gave us the calculator.

“Now we can practice using a calculator, Lutz.”

“Yeah.”

“Got anything else to ask?” questioned Benno, which reminded me.

“Oh, we need to order a contract-paper-sized suketa before the spring, but...”

“Just write your supply orders. Mark already knows where to take them, so leave them with him.”

“What? But...” Mark had said that, if I didn’t deliver the supply orders myself with accompanying details, I would have only myself to blame if a mix up happened. I shouldn’t just leave it all to him.

“There’s something else I need you to work on. C’mon now, write the supply orders.” At Benno’s encouragement, I took out the supply order writing set from my tote bag. I only had one more board for writing supply orders on.

“Mr. Benno, I’m out of boards for the supply orders...”

“Yeah, ‘cause you ordered a lot of stuff. Have some more.”

“Thanks! Also, I’m almost out of ink.” We had used a lot of ink both writing a bunch of supply orders and testing how well it worked with various experimental pieces of paper.

Upon hearing my request, Benno’s mouth twitched. “...I want to charge you for it, but eh, sure. Consider it part of my initial

investment,” he said, which reminded me. Otto said that ink was expensive enough that children generally couldn’t use it. I had never heard its actual price, though, so I timidly asked Benno for it.

“This may be rude of me, but if you were to charge me for it, how much would ink cost?”

“About four small silvers.”

“Bwuh?!” Lutz and I couldn’t afford that even if we pooled our savings together!

“Don’t waste it.”

“R-Right. Of course not!” I wanted to use ink for my book-making, but I would have to give up on buying some myself. Using my leftover soot pen would be much better.

I scratched out my supply orders. I was used to writing them by this point. The tip of my pen ended up rounded in no time, so I had Lutz shave it into a point. We then asked Benno for an average-sized piece of contract paper, measured it, and then wrote more supply orders based on that information.

Benno looked at the supply orders I had just written and his eyes widened. “Not a single grammar error or misprint. I’ll give these to Mark. And Myne... I’ll be in as much trouble as you if this paper doesn’t get made. So don’t look so worried, I’ll make sure this works out.” If Benno said he would make sure it worked out, well, I could trust that. I let out a slow sigh of relief and packed my things.

“...Is that all you came to talk about?”

“Yes.” I nodded, and immediately Benno sat up straight, his expression hardening. Lutz and I both straightened up as well, sensing that he was about to talk business.

“Alright. Myne, I want to talk to you about the hair-cleaning liquid you told me about.” I had told Benno how to make the simple all-in-one shampoo while we were experimenting with paper and borrowing the key for the workshop. Since I had completely given up my rights on the shampoo through contract magic, I had no idea why he would be bringing it up now. I tilted my head in confusion and Benno continued, sounding troubled.

“You said those meryls had the best oil for it, so I waited until this season to start making it.”

“But meryl season is almost over, isn’t it? You haven’t started yet?” Lutz and I exchanged glances. Indeed, meryl season was almost over. My family had already gathered plenty of meryls and were in the process of making more shampoo. Benno was so profit-obsessed that I had assumed he had already made and sold plenty of it.

“You’re misunderstanding. I bought a large number of the fruit and had a certain workshop start making the liquid, but even following your instructions, the stuff doesn’t end up like what you

had. Got any ideas as to why?" said Benno, making my brows reflexively furrow. To make shampoo you just had to crush fruit, wring out the oil, and add some herbs. I had no idea where there was room for error in that process. Lutz had helped me make it enough times that even he was confused.

"...I don't know what to say. The process for making it isn't that complicated." I could think of various ways to improve the shampoo with certain ingredients, but I couldn't figure out how one could fail to make it in the first place. Tuuli and Lutz could both make proper shampoo on their own without any guidance from me.

"I didn't want to send you out there where people can see you, but if I don't finish that liquid, it'll be a breach of our magic contract. Would you mind coming with me to the workshop?"

Breaching a magic contract carried with it severe penalties and, worst-case scenario, you might die. Fearing for my life, I immediately said "Okay," but Lutz grabbed my arm.

"Myne, you're not healthy enough for that right now. You aren't in a great condition right now, remember?" Lutz was right, but it was rare for me to ever be in a good condition around this time of year. When it was this cold I could get a fever anytime, anywhere. I would never get anything done if I didn't just settle for "not having a fever" being healthy enough to go places.

"But we don't know how long it'll take for me to be in good condition, and there's already a little faint snow falling, so we should go now while I'm not sick with a fever."

"I get that, but..." Lutz began to worry and Benno gently rapped his head to calm him down.

"Don't sweat it so much, Lutz. She won't be walking, I'll be carrying her. Not like I could bear to slow down to her pace anyway."

"...Well, uh, I guess that'd be fine," said Lutz, so Benno once again ended up carrying me.

...Why had the shampoo making process failed? I had no idea, it had never failed for me before. Would I be able to figure it out?

Why It Failed and How to Fix It

As Benno carried me to the factory making the shampoo, he looked at me somewhat awkwardly, as if he had something to say but didn't really want to say it.

"Hey, Myne. About that hair cleaning liquid..."

"Yes? What about the (simple all-in-one shampoo)?"

"It's long and hard to say. Can't you call it something else?"

It was true that the name I thought up would feel long and hard to understand to Benno and others from this world, since they didn't understand the words I was actually saying. Which meant that nobles might not really take to the product after it entered the market.

"Aaah, well, I kinda just made it up on the spot, so it's not an important name or anything. You can change it."

"...Really?" Benno blinked in surprise.

I nodded at him with a smile. It all started because I felt great after finally cleaning my itchy, dry hair and just said the first thing that came to mind. I wasn't attached to it. "Mhm. Feel free to call it whatever you like."

"Y'know, that doesn't make it very easy for me." Benno furrowed his brows deeply in thought. It took a lot of marketing sense to give a new product a name.

Wanting to help as much as I can, I rattled off the advice that came to mind. "We're talking about a product name here, so I think it should be easy to say and easy to remember. Maybe instead of calling it something like 'hair cleanser' we should use words that make people think about looking pretty and feeling good?"

"Mnnn... Eehh..." Benno's expression hardened the more I spoke. It was possible that my advice had just increased the pressure on him.

"I've been calling it, uh, (simple all-in-one shampoo) this whole time too, so I dunno, I think it's fine." Lutz shrugged casually as Benno fell so deep into thought that there were heavy creases on his forehead.

"Myne, do you have any ideas? Any at all?" Benno looked at me for help, having seemingly failed to think of a good name on his own.

But I had grown so used to calling it simple all-in-one shampoo that I couldn't really think of another name for it. I could just shorten it, but I didn't know if the people of this world would really understand what the name meant. "Mmm? I don't know, how about

(rinse shampoo)?”

“...It always has to have (shampoo), huh?”

“Not really, that’s just what comes to mind for me, so...”

Benno murmured to himself for a bit, but because he was both unable to think of a better name himself and used to my original name for it, he settled on shortening it to “rinsham.” *Um... Is that really good enough?*

When we reached the central plaza, Benno headed straight for the western road. I blinked in surprise, having expected the oil-squeezing workshop to be along the craftsman’s alley.

“There are workshops on the west side of town too? I thought they were all in the craftsman’s alley.”

“It used to be a food-processing shop. You generally find those in the west since they want to be near the market where people move the most products.”

“Right, meryls are food. I’ve only been using them to make rinsham for so long I almost forgot.”

When I first made shampoo, I was just obsessed with getting my hair clean and stopping it from itching. It never even crossed my mind that it would end up being turned into a product to sell. At first I was at a loss, since I didn’t have rice, seaweed, or any kind of juice. I dug through my memories to think of everything about shampoo I could remember, and in the process, remembered reading a natural living magazine that described mixing fruit oil with powdered salt and orange peels to make a scrub. My old mom and I had made it together when she got obsessed with natural living.

Incidentally, that magazine also described firmly mixing egg whites to make face spreads, or using dried plums and sake to make skin lotion, but none of that stuff had anything to do with me and my young, fresh skin. All that concerned me was the ingredients to make shampoo.

...It sure was hard to get oil that first time. To be honest, I had been so stressed out from my itchy head, and I didn’t think about how difficult the journey to the forest was. So I didn’t realize it at the time, but I had been kind of unfair to Tuuli by making her get the ingredients for me. Thanks to her efforts, I got my head clean, made my hair silky smooth again, and took my first step toward a healthy lifestyle. *Thank you, Tuuli!*

The workshop Benno led us to looked like a large warehouse. As one would expect from a food processing plant, there was a mixture of a wide variety of different smells drifting through the air. There were several work tables lined up next to each other where workers were busy working away at different jobs. Along the walls were shelves of tools ready for use.

“Is the foreman here? Tell him Benno wants to see him,” said Benno to a nearby worker, who replied with an enthusiastic “Understood!” before rushing off.

Benno set me down and waited for the foreman to arrive. Soon enough, the worker spoke to a somewhat overweight man, who then walked in our direction with his belly shaking. You could tell at a glance that he was the boss of a shop that dealt with edibles. His body made it clear that he loved eating from the bottom of his heart. I had called him “somewhat overweight,” but that was from the perspective of a Japanese person. Considering how scarce food was in the city, he could probably be considered fairly fat.

“Hello Benno, thank you for coming all this way. I see you’ve brought two kids with you.”

“They’re the ones who made the rinsham in the first place. Keep that a secret,” said Benno, with a forceful enough glare that the foreman bobbed his head in silent agreement. “So, did you figure the problem out?”

“I’m afraid not. We’ve tried changing our tools, workers, and all sorts of things, but it feels like we’re just getting further away from making the right product.”

Benno’s expression darkened with frustration at the negative report and the way he glared at the anxious foreman honestly made me feel like I was getting the same stink eye.

I pulled on the foreman’s sleeve and spoke to him. “Um, could you show me how you’re making it?”

“Sure. I’d appreciate you telling me if you notice something. I’m getting reports that the stuff we make here doesn’t make hair that much cleaner.”

We moved to a corner of the room so the foreman could do a live demonstration. It’d be a waste of materials if he failed, so he crushed just one meryl using weights to squash the fruit all at once. He then held up the cloth and wrung it so the oil would drip into the bowl below. It took way less time than I was used to, since both Tuuli and Lutz had to use a hammer.

“And that’s how we get the oil. Same so far, right?” The oil-extraction process seemed fine to me. I could hear Lutz muttering that it looked the same to him, and at a glance, I couldn’t see a problem either.

“We have to use hammers to crush the fruit instead of weights. But I don’t think a difference that minor would impact anything that significantly.”

“Yeah, kids would have to use a hammer for this. Guess I should try that next,” murmured the foreman.

But before we did that, I had a request. “Do you mind if I see the

oil you just squeezed out?"

The foreman nodded and handed over the bowl. Inside I saw perfectly clear, green oil with no impurities floating around. It was oil completely different from the thick, white oil we dealt with.

"...Oh, okay. I understand now." I figured out the problem as soon as I saw the oil. That was a good thing and I was happy to have the solution, but at the same time, they were failing for a reason that kinda made me sad. So, so sad.

"What?! What're we doing wrong?!" The foreman practically pounded for the answer, and I gave it to him with somewhat slumped shoulders.

"...It's the cloth you're using to wring out the oil," I said.

Benno immediately glared at the foreman, who opened his eyes wide and desperately shook his hands. "The cloth?! But I bought pretty good ones, just for this new job!"

"...That's the problem." Now, both Benno and the foreman were looking at me with wide eyes.

I shrugged and placed the oil-filled bowl on the table. "The pieces of cloth that our families have are rough and loose. Threadbare. I think you can tell by our clothes, but we're poor. We don't use cloth this finely woven, so when we squeeze out the oil, little bits of the broken fruit and tiny seed-like things get stuck in the oil."

The oil that Tuuli and Lutz squeezed out was always thick white, not pure green. The reason was simple. The cloth we used was so much more threadbare than the ones in this workshop, and on top of that, we squeezed the fruit completely dry since we couldn't afford to waste any of the oil, even though that ended up making the oil less pure.

"The stuff that makes the oil thick is called (scrub)... um, I mean, it's important for getting hair clean." The pure oil made in workshops like this would normally have powdery salt, dried citrus peels, and nuts added to it in order to make a scrub. But in our case, the oil was already a scrub right after being squeezed out. Not to mention that we didn't have the leeway to add anything to the oil in the first place. We were pushing it just by adding herbs for the smell.

The foreman's mouth was hanging open in stunned surprise. He hadn't expected that answer. Neither had I, really. To think that the more he struggled to get better quality oil, the more distant from his goal he went. I could only imagine the stress he had been feeling.

On the other hand, Benno's expression had significantly softened, likely out of relief over having found the source of the problem. He picked up the cloth with the tips of his fingers and shrugged. "Didn't think the cloth would be the problem here. Not sure if I've ever been punished for buying high-quality tools before. I was thinking the

problem would have something to do with mixing the herbs.”

“The herbs are mainly just there for the smell.”

The foreman let out a heavy sigh, looking both relieved and troubled. “I guess we’ve gotta throw out all the oil we got using these cloths, then.”

“What? No way. That’d be a huge waste, it’s still usable.” If given the choice, I would have liked to use high-quality oil free of impurities myself. Putting in ingredients to make a proper scrub would result in rinsham a lot better than what I usually made. “You just have to put fruit stuff into this pure oil. With the right selection of ingredients, you’ll have rinsham a lot better than what I made myself.”

“Yeah? You sure know a lot for a little girl, don’t you?” muttered the foreman, impressed. At the same time, Benno’s eyes gleamed like a predator who had found his prey.

“Ah...” *Oh no. I shouldn’t have said that.* I looked at Lutz, the blood draining from my face, and I saw him shaking his head in exasperation. At this rate Benno was going to find me out the same way Lutz found me out. *AAAAAAAH! I’m so dumb! Don’t I ever learn?!*

I somehow managed to keep my mouth from trembling while forcing a fake smile on my face. *Stay calm, stay calm. He hasn’t found me out yet.* “Just be careful about using stuff with rough grains, since that can hurt the scalp,” I said with a smile and then tried to leave the workshop, but Benno gripped my shoulder and held me in place with a ferocious smile of his own.

“Myne, it sounds like you know a lot more than you’ve been letting on, huh?”

I did, but I wasn’t about to dig my hole any deeper. It would be impossible to lead a peaceful life here if I drew suspicion to myself like this. I needed to escape Benno’s interrogation through any means possible. Unlike Lutz, Benno didn’t know Myne from the past and thus had no concrete evidence to fuel his suspicions. I could get through this if I tried hard enough. And try hard I would.

Digging my heels into the ground to defy the force that was Benno, I did my best to smile and bluff my way out of the situation despite the cold sweat running down my back. “Anything more will cost you. I charge an information fee for my services. I don’t talk for free.”

“How much?” Benno juttet his chin up with a grin and told me to name a price, but no matter how much he paid me, I wasn’t planning on telling him anything. However, negotiations would end the second I said that. It was important that I make Benno choose to withdraw from negotiations himself.

My head spun as I desperately thought of something to say, my heart pounding in my chest. “...The rinsham’s already going to do well

in the market as is. Just how much would you be willing to pay just to earn a little more on top of that, really?" I said, maintaining my cool as we glared at each other behind fake smiles. Benno's dark-red eyes were gleaming with a ferocious light and I wanted to just give in immediately out of fear, but this was one battle I couldn't afford to lose. Anything I said about this would be viewed with clear suspicion and draw unwanted attention.

Benno spoke to the foreman without taking his glaring eyes off mine. "Mind if we borrow your conference room?"

"N-Not at all, go ahead." The moment the foreman answered, Benno hefted me up and abducted me into the conference room.

"Bwuhbwuhbwuh?!"

"Myne?!"

"We're just having a little chat! Nobody follow us!" shouted Benno, making Lutz pause in his tracks with a jerk. The foreman nodded, pale.

Having seized control of someone else's conference room, Benno set me down on a chair and then sat on the one opposite to it. He glared at me in silence for a bit, then spoke. "Two small golds."

"What?" ...I had just misheard him. It slipped past my ears. I thought I heard a pretty absurd price for the information, but it was all just my imagination.

I ended up stunned, but by pretending I had simply misheard him, I managed to get back on my feet. But the moment I did, Benno repeated himself, more clearly this time. "I'll pay two small golds. Tell me how to improve the rinsham, what fruit to use, everything you know."

He would be willing to pay two small golds just to improve the rinsham? Just how much profit was he expecting to earn off of it? Maybe he was planning on overcharging nobles like he overcharged Freida.

"...Mr. Benno, how much are you planning to charge for each unit of rinsham?" I questioned, making Benno narrow his eyes a little and snort.

"That's got nothing to do with you."

"In that case, I've already told you how to make the rinsham, so improving it has nothing to do with me either." I let out a sigh of relief on the inside and, thinking that would be the end of the conversation, put my hands on the table to climb off the seat.

"Three small golds. Don't expect me to go higher." Benno grabbed onto my hands and, looking a little frustrated, raised his price. My heart wavered at that massive sum, but if that was his maximum price, then the negotiations were already over. For the sake of a peaceful life, I had to get Benno off my trail.

“I decli—”

“Take the money and save it. The only thing that can fix your devouring is money.”

I started to say “I decline,” but Benno interrupted me with a glare. He spoke in a low, forceful voice that made it sound like he was on the verge of grinding his teeth.

“...Mr. Benno, you knew about my devouring?”

“I considered the possibility, but didn’t know for sure until the geezer told me the other day.” The geezer being the guildmaster. What had he told Benno, I wondered, and what connection did it have with how Benno lowered his guard around him after I sold the hairpins to Freida?

Benno’s change of tone threw me off enough that I lost my strength in the process of standing up and fell back onto my chair with a plop. That must have looked like me adjusting back into my seat, as Benno leaned further over the table to bring his face closer to mine. He then spoke in a low voice, such that only I could possibly hear him. Despite being faint whispers, I could clearly hear everything he said.

“His granddaughter has the devouring just like you, but she’s alive thanks to money and the guildmaster’s connection to nobles. You need to sell the information you have, save money, and prepare for the day that’s coming whether you like it or not.”

“What day...?”

“The day you lose control of the heat inside of your body.”

Understanding washed throughout my body. I had felt the devouring heat within me growing over time, bit by bit, but had passed it off as my imagination of variation based on my health. It seemed that Benno and the guildmaster had come to the conclusion that the devouring heat within me was indeed growing over time, and eventually it would become too much for me to control. When I placed social isolation and being dead on two sides of the scale, the answer here became painfully clear.

...I don’t want to die yet. I had finally gotten to the point where I could make paper. Over the winter I had failed repeatedly, but after a lot of work I created an environment where making books was no longer just a dream. Not to mention that I got more used to life in this world as the seasons passed, which meant less clashing with my family. In the past I was always dead weight, but at last I had found somewhere I could be at least a little useful. Living in this world was finally getting to be fun.

I didn’t want to die yet, but I had to consider what would happen if I gave Benno the information he wanted and he got creeped out. What would happen if he considered me a creepy, weird little girl?

Unlike Lutz, who knew Myne from the past, Benno had no context. He would just consider me a creepy kid who knew way too much about things she shouldn't. He probably wouldn't attempt to kill me just for being creepy, and since he didn't have a history with my family like Lutz, nothing too bad would happen if he informed them that I was being creepy.

The worst case scenario was just Benno distancing himself from us and canceling his plans to hire us as his apprentices. However, if that happened, I could just accept Freida and the guildmaster's offer. I wouldn't be completely out of options if Benno withdrew his support.

...If money's what it takes to survive, well, I want to keep living.

"Okay. I'll sell it for three small golds," I said, looking at Benno in the eyes. He gave a small nod and released my hands. Then, after we touched cards, he picked up my bag and took out the supply order set without even asking me first.

"H-Hey! That's my stuff!"

"Stuff my store supplied you."

"That's true, but at least ask me first!"

"Yeah, sorry," said Benno without sounding sorry at all. He took the pen and ink and readied them, treating the supply order board like a memo pad. "Alright, let's hear it. Start with how we can sell the oil we thought wasn't working."

"You just have to put ingredients into it to make it a (scrub). There's a lot of different things that would work here, but the easiest will likely be salt. Crush the salt until it's a powder, add it to the oil, and it should work for both cleaning and for deodorizing."

"Salt? Really?" Out of everything I had read about in the magazine, mixing fruit oil with powdered salt was the easiest thing to make. Benno's eyes were wide with surprise, probably not having expected something so familiar to him to be effective here.

"...You could also dry the peel of a (citrus) fruit, by which I mean, dry the peel of something like an apfelsige and crush it into a powder too. It should smell better and clean more than the oil by itself."

"Apfelsige peel, huh? Got it. Anything else?" Benno looked at me while scratching away.

"Mmm, maybe (nuts)... aaah, I mean, mixing in some nussfrut powder should work too. I've never had the opportunity to try any of this myself since my family is too poor."

Benno's dark-red eyes were locked on me, his expression making it clear he was intent on squeezing out as much information as possible from me. "You know about things you couldn't try yourself? Myne... just who are you?"

"That's a secret, and not one you'll be buying with small golds, either."

Benno's mouth bent into a bitter frown. My heart pounded as he looked at me with the suspicious eyes of someone looking at a person that they just couldn't understand. I wasn't strong enough to bear being looked at like that without losing my cool a little.

With my fake smile still plastered on my face, I decided to roll the dice and risk asking Benno where I stood with him. "Are you going to cut off ties with me because I'm a creepy little girl? I sold you this information prepared for that to happen."

Benno's eyes widened with surprise for a second, then he lowered his eyes and scratched his head before letting out a heavy sigh. He then slowly shook his head multiple times and looked up. When he did, he was wearing his usual confident grin. "Nah, you're gonna make me a lot of money. My only concern here is making sure nobody else steals you away. Don't forget, I'm a merchant," he said, standing up and ruffling my hair. By treating me normally, he was signaling that he had decided to maintain the status quo and not dig any deeper.

I let out a relieved sigh, ducked to avoid Benno's hand since he wouldn't stop rustling my hair, and stuck my tongue out at him.

A Trombe Appears

The season had become such that waking up and getting out of bed in the morning was quite the challenge. As I lazily stayed in bed, thinking about how cold it was, my dad finished getting ready for work.

“Myne, how’re you feeling?”

“Mmm? Same as always. Why do you ask, Dad?” Maybe he misinterpreted me staying in bed as me feeling sick. I lazily sat up and Dad looked at me with concern.

“Otto wants to have a winter meeting with you and asked if you could come today.”

“Okay, I can go. I’m not sick right now and I don’t have any business with Benno.”

Dad left to get to the gate before it opened at second bell. After seeing him off, I got out of bed to quickly change. “Mom, Tuuli. I’m going to the gate today.”

“Got it. There won’t be much to gather in the forest soon, so I think you should be fine not going there anymore this year.”

“Tuuli is right. We don’t want you catching any unnecessary fevers around this time of year, Myne. You should stop going to the forest for now.”

As the temperature dropped and catching colds became more normal, it became increasingly common for me to have days where I just didn’t feel good. Pushing myself just led to those around me having to take care of me, so I decided it was best if I indeed stopped going to the forest.

“Hey, Myne. Going to the gate today?” said Lutz after seeing me leave my building with just my tote bag. I was bundled up in clothes to not catch a cold, but in contrast, the other kids were all wearing relatively light clothing. Bundling up made it harder to move freely and it was important to gather as much firewood as possible in this brief period of winter right before the snow came.

I walked to the gate along with the other kids. As of late I could more or less keep up with them, ending up only a little behind. Though almost every time I decided to try and catch up, Lutz would stop me.

“Alright, I’ll be passing by the gate on my way back, so be sure to

wait for me.”

“Uh huh. Good luck with your gathering, Lutz.” Everyone else was going to the forest, so we split at the gate. I didn’t see my dad at the gate, but the guards recognized me by now. I saluted at one of them and they took me to the usual night watch’s room.

“Mr. Otto, are you here? It’s me, Myne.” I opened the door and saw that the shelves along the walls were already filled with budget-related boards. Otto was surrounded by the boards, sorting through them.

“Heya, Myne. Good to see you here.”

“It’s been a while, Mr. Otto.” I gave him a sharp salute and moved to the chair closest to the furnace. After basically climbing up the decently sized chair, I took out my slate and pen from my bag.

“So, let’s talk about our winter plans. How often do you think you’ll be able to drop by?”

“Umm, I talked to my dad about it, and he decided that I can come when I’m feeling good, it’s not snowing, and he’s on morning or noon shift.”

First of all, it wasn’t common for me to feel good during the winter. I was stronger than last year and could pray that I wouldn’t be bedridden with colds as much, but it was impossible to predict.

Second of all, there was the weather. There were constant blizzards during the winter. Dad said that it didn’t have to be completely sunny and I could go when there was just light snow, but I knew he would go back on that the second he saw a snowflake. He was just too overprotective.

And finally, Dad worked the night shift on a third of his working days during the winter.

“I think I’ll be able to count on both hands the total number of times I can visit the gate during the winter.”

“...Well, that’s about what I expected. I was just hoping for more since even that one time you helped last winter made a big difference. I hope you drop by as often as possible.”

“Uh huh.” Doing some math was all it took to earn some slate pens, so I didn’t mind. I would need more slate pens this year than the last since Lutz and I would be studying together, so my plan was to work hard and earn a lot of them. “Oh, and by the way, the pens I use here don’t count as part of my pay.”

“Pf, hahaha,” laughed Otto. “Thinking like a merchant now, I see. Don’t worry, the slate pens you use doing work won’t count. Relax and write out all the math you want.” He may have found that funny, but regardless, it meant a lot to me. I rolled up my sleeves so they wouldn’t erase the letters and readied my slate pen.

“Here’s your work for today.” Otto placed a stack of boards in

front of me. They were expense ledgers for the supplies used by the department of higher-ups who managed the guards. It seemed that Otto was in charge of the budgets for the entire department. He told me with slumped shoulders that it was easier to do all the work himself rather than run the risk of pointing out the mistakes of his superiors. Being careful not to make any mistakes myself, I got to work summing the numbers up while double checking the calculations.

“You there, Otto?! Take your place at the gate immediately!” A soldier burst into the room looking rushed. Otto drew a sharp line on the board to save his place and, after telling me not to let anyone touch the calculator, ran out of the room.

There seemed to be a commotion throughout the entire gate. I could hear a ton of footsteps rushing by on the other side of the door, sounding louder than usual footsteps due to the stone floors reverberating. Everyone was so rushed that I really couldn’t just open the door and ask someone what had happened.

I had visited the gate many times before to help Otto, but never before had things gotten this intense. Uneasiness crept into my heart, which wasn’t helped by the fact that I was all alone in the room.

...I’m going to be okay here, right? I breathed deeply, and as I looked around the empty room, I felt a faint dizziness. Not about to let even the slightest failing of my spirit pass by unnoticed, the heat within me went on a rampage. The heat trying to burst out from within me felt like it was pointing out my weakness. Frustrated, I tensed up my body to force the heat back down. I imagined putting a lid on the fire and sealing it within me.

“...Haaah. So tired.” Fighting back the devouring took so much out of me that my anxiety faded a little.

I continued doing math and Otto soon returned. He finished up the board he was working on and started packing up his share of the paperwork.

“Seems like a trombe showed up. A kid came running for help so half the guards here went off to the forest. I have to stand at the gate until they come back, but could you keep working here while I’m gone? Also, I’ll send anyone with letters of introduction your way. I trust you to take care of them.”

Knowing what had happened calmed me down enough that I could do my work without worrying so much. Speaking of which, Lutz had mentioned earlier that trombes generally started showing up in the forest after late autumn. Maybe we could get more trombe wood to turn into paper.

...Mmm? But if it’s matured enough that soldiers have to join the fight, maybe the wood will be too hard for paper? Who knows. The last time a

trombe showed up it only took some kids to cut it down, so I didn't feel nervous at all. I just got back to work lining up letters and doing math. Eventually, I heard a noise outside the door again.

"Myne, it's Lutz. He says he has something he wants to talk to you about."

"If he got some trombe wood, I need to go home to talk to him about it. I've finished the math from here to here."

"Thanks. You're a big help." The kids and soldiers must have returned together, as I could see them hanging around the gate with trombe wood in hand. I looked around for Lutz and saw Dad rushing my way with a large log on his shoulder.

"Myne! Look, your dad cut down a trombe this big!"

"Wow, that's pretty big. Are we going to use that for firewood?"

"No, trombe wood doesn't burn well, so it's not good for firewood. We're going to carve it into furniture. That furniture will survive a house fire, so wood like this is pretty valuable."

"W-Wow, I see. Interesting." I should expect nothing less from a weird fantasy plant. It could hardly be called wood if it doesn't even burn in a fire! As I shook my head in both exasperation and admiration, I saw Lutz gesturing at me from behind Dad. "Yes, Lutz?"

"What, you only got tiny branches like that, Lutz? Take a look, Myne. Your dad's a lot cooler." Dad puffed out his chest with victorious pride after seeing the trombe branches in Lutz's basket, but I would really rather him not try to compete with a little kid. And unfortunately for him, Lutz had exactly the kind of thin, young branches I wanted.

I let out a sigh, but in reality, since trombes got harder to cut the larger they got, those who had managed to chop off large logs were considered heroes by the kids and soldiers. I could see people comparing the wood and competing to see who had thicker wood and larger branches.

"These branches suck!" One of the kids, bullied over his small branches, threw his trombe wood on the ground in a tantrum. Trombe wood didn't make for good firewood and the young, soft branches weren't strong enough to be made into furniture. It was considered useless to just about everyone. But for me, it was necessary to make high-quality paper. I wasn't about to miss a chance to get some for free.

"If you don't want it, can I have it? Do you really not want it?"

"...'Course not, it sucks!" Embarrassed by all the attention that he was drawing, the boy left it at that and ran off. I picked up the abandoned trombe wood and other kids started taking their own wood out of their baskets.

"You can have mine, too. Bringing it home with me won't do

much good.”

“You may have mine as well. I don’t need it.” A fairly large amount of wood ended up piled around me.

“Lutz, looks like we have a lot of it now.”

“...Yup.” Lutz gathered up the dropped trombe wood with me and packed it all into his basket.

Dad, stunned by what he had seen, furrowed his brows and looked at our baskets. “...Myne. What’d you want that stuff for?”

“The wood I use needs to be soft and young. Let’s go, Lutz.” I turned my back to Dad and started walking off.

Lutz followed, scratching his head. “You know, I brought back some of the trombe ’cause I know we need it, but uh... We gotta use cut wood within like, five to seven days, right? How’s that gonna work? I don’t wanna get in the river when it’s this cold and we can’t waste the firewood we’d need to boil water for a whole bell. Should we just give it up?”

I knew that there wasn’t much firewood lying around the forest in this time of the year, but I knew for sure that Benno would be furious if we wasted trombe wood just because of that. “...I know what he’s going to say already, but let’s talk to Benno about it first.”

“He’d definitely get mad if we just threw it all away. Haaah... I’m not gonna go into the river when it’s this cold.”

We headed to Benno’s store, but the guard naturally said Lutz couldn’t go inside looking like he did. He would have to wait outside. The guard called Mark, who followed him back to the door and then went inside with me. We entered the store just as a customer left Benno’s room. The customer glared at me in my poor-person outfit and let out an audible “hmpf.” *Mmm, I really should buy a change of clothes soon. I don’t want people to sour toward the clothes Benno sells due to me. Which means I need to save up my money fast.*

Benno blinked in surprise after seeing me walk into his room. “What’re you doing here? We didn’t have a meeting planned.”

“This is an unplanned visit, but I have something I need to talk to you about. Turns out a trombe showed up in the forest today,” I said, and immediately Benno stood up with a clatter and leaned forward.

“A trombe?! Did you get any wood from it?!”

“Yes, we ended up with a lot of wood. But, the thing is... it’ll be hard to turn it into paper.”

“Why’s that?” Benno narrowed his eyes in suspicion, not understanding how it could be hard. Despite knowing it would make him mad, I explained my reasoning.

“Ummm, well, we don’t have enough firewood to boil water for a whole bell, and the ri—”

“You idiot!” Before I could finish explaining that the river would

be too cold to enter, the impatient Benno dropped his lightning on me. “Think about how much cheaper firewood is than rare trombe wood! Don’t even try to tell me you can’t even understand the concept of investing in materials for more profit later!”

“...I thought you would say that. Can we go to the lumberyard with Mr. Mark to buy firewood?” I looked so young that even if I went to the lumberyard asking for wood, I would look suspicious and get turned away.

“...Where’s Lutz?”

“He’s outside. We came here right after he got back from the forest, so he’s a little too messy to come inside...” I said, immediately after which Benno rang the bell on his table to summon Mark.

“Mark, ask Lutz if Myne’s doing well enough to go to the lumberyard today. Myne, you write the supply order here.” Benno took out a board and ink for me, so I started writing the supply order.

“Mr. Benno, I just need enough wood to boil water for an hour, what should I write?”

“Just write that. They’ll sell you a little more than you need and that’s ideal.”

I nodded and kept writing, at which point Mark returned from talking to Lutz.

“It seems that Myne would do well to not walk any further today. If she has finished writing the supply order, I will go to the lumberyard with Lutz.”

“Thank you, Mark.”

After giving Mark the supply order and seeing him off, Benno handed me several boards. “Read these if you’re bored.”

“Gladly!” The boards were basically advice for merchants and discussed a lot of key points about contracts. Pleased at the opportunity, I pored over them while humming, and eventually I realized something weird.

“Mr. Benno, does the wood Mark’s buying count as part of your initial investment in us?” Benno turned to silently look at me, but didn’t say anything. “Also, I thought it was kinda weird, but why did you say that you were done investing in us after we finished our prototypes? Didn’t the magic contract we signed say you would pay for everything until our baptism? Shouldn’t the expensive suketa count as part of that?” I thought about why Benno would have me read boards about the contracts and the only thing that came to mind was the details of our magic contract.

“...Finally noticed, huh?”

“What?! Why’d you trick us?!”

“I didn’t trick you. I tested you, to see if you remembered what the contract we signed said. Let’s just say I was curious to see how

you'd react if I broke the contract. You didn't say anything so I figured you forgot what it said." He snorted and glared at me while drumming his fingers on the table.

For a single moment I was at a loss for words, but then I managed to return his glare. "I just thought it made sense for you to stop paying us after we finished the prototypes. I never expected that you were tricking us, and since magic contracts burn up after being signed, I couldn't double check."

Benno snorted again and shrugged with a smug grin. "It's exactly because the contracts burn up that you have to write it down somewhere else or burn it all into your memory. You were naive."

"...I'll try not to make the same mistake again." Benno wasn't wrong. I should have either written the contract down or memorized it. It was entirely true that all that talk of the magic punishing those who break the contracts made me let my guard down.

"You followed up on it, so I'll pay for your stuff."

"That's what you agreed to do anyway. Wouldn't not paying be a breach of contract?" I pursed my lips, pouting, and Benno looked down at me with the gleeful smile of victory.

"It'd only be a breach of contract if I refused to pay. You not following up is your own problem. Now that you've followed up, I'll pay. It won't be a breach of contract if I do. Be sure to remember all this if you want to be a merchant one day."

"...Guuuuh."

Benno's lips curved into a broader grin as I groaned with frustration and said, "If you hadn't noticed after reading all that about contracts, I would've wrung you dry," with a laugh. I understood that he was trying to help me grow as a merchant, to the point of giving me hints to help me along in the right direction, but it was still frustrating.

As I looked over the boards once more, intent on not letting him deceive me again, Benno paused his work and spoke to me. "Aaah, right. Could you start your winter handiwork a little early?"

"My family's already finished preparing for winter this year, so we could, but why?" Our winter preparations were swung every which way by my dad's work circumstances. Every soldier at the gate needed time off to prepare for winter, but not everyone could leave work at once, so they took days off in shifts. Last year his shift came fairly late, so we were preparing right up until the blizzards were hitting, but this year his came early and we managed to finish fairly soon.

"Could you make somewhere around ten to twenty hairpins of varying colors soon? The guildmaster bragged so much about his granddaughter's hairpin that I've got a lot of people asking me about them. And some of those people I can't refuse, either."

“Won’t that ruin the special feeling for Freida of being the only one with a flower hairpin during the winter baptism ceremony?” I didn’t know if it was smart to ruin the reason we had for overcharging them, and judging by Benno’s shifting eyes, he didn’t know either.

“...Her hairpin will be the only one made to match her outfit. Store-bought ones are completely different.”

“In that case, I think I’ll charge you extra for them, given the change in schedule.” I smiled while requesting a higher commission fee, leaving Benno at a loss for words. “When you get the chance to earn money, take it and profit as much as you possibly can, right? I’m learning from your example so I can be a fine merchant one day.” I laughed to myself and Benno frowned bitterly.

“Ten middle coppers per hairpin. You can’t complain about twice the pay, right?”

“That won’t do. Choose eleven middle coppers or thirteen. Splitting the money won’t work out smoothly otherwise, considering the different work Lutz and I are doing.” We had already told our families two coppers for the flower part and one for the pin part. Lutz and I were splitting the difference and having an odd number of middle coppers left over would be a real pain.

“Fine. Eleven middle coppers. You dirty merchant.”

“I am positively delighted to receive such lavish praise from one of your esteem.”

“...Seriously, where are you learning all those words?” said Benno, looking equal parts exasperated and amused.

I shrugged. “Oh, could I have the pay for one of the hairpins now? I could take them out of my savings, but I would prefer early pay.”

“That won’t be a problem, but why?”

“I need to cast a spell on my family to make them work fast.” I would need Mom and Tuuli’s help to finish ten hairpins before snow fell, and if I wanted their help, I needed to motivate them. My mom in particular had done winter handiwork for most of her life and thus would know very well just how ridiculously high the pay for these hairpins was. Which meant that she would probably feel suspicious about whether or not I was being tricked, that we would make them and then not get paid. If I could show her that I was getting paid for each hairpin properly, both her motivation and trust would shoot up at the same time.

Suddenly, a knock came on the door. “We have returned, sir. The ordered firewood will arrive today before the store closes. We will have it carried to your storage building by tomorrow, Myne.”

“Thank you very much.”

“Goodbye, and be careful about the cold.”

Mark saw me outside and I saw Lutz standing there with his

mostly empty basket. They had dropped the trombe wood off in our building while on the way to the lumberyard. That explained why they elected not to bring me with them.

The two of us slowly walked home between buildings, the sky darkening faster than usual thanks to the season. I really wanted to rush home since it was so cold, but if I moved around like that I would definitely collapse with a fever in no time.

We trudged home, and along the way I talked to Lutz about our winter handiwork needing to be done early. I told him that Benno promised to pay immediately and that we could get to work as soon as I got my family's help.

Lutz nodded once, then lowered his eyebrows, worried. "I could make all those pins on my own without my family's help. I'm more worried about the trombe wood."

"The trombe wood? Why?" I tilted my head in confusion.

Lutz slumped over and let out a heavy sigh. "...Hey, Myne. You think you'll get to go to the forest to help me now that your family's told you to stop? I'm gonna have to make it all myself, aren't I?"

"I was planning to work in the storage building this time, so we can make it together. I'm not sure what my family will say about me going outside for a whole bell, though." I didn't think it'd be too hard to get outside if I told them I was going to Benno's store and that I wouldn't be leaving the city. But the longer I was outside the more likely it was I would catch a cold and get a fever, which was a problem.

"The storage building...? Don't we need the river?" Lutz opened his eyes wide in surprise. But it was clear as day that Lutz wouldn't be able to carry the pot, steamer, and firewood to the forest.

"It was more efficient to work in the forest before since we had to get our materials and firewood there, but now we have everything in the storage building. There's no reason to work in the forest, and carrying everything there would be too hard anyway."

"Ah, right. I would've had to carry everything." Lutz had been so worried about working alone that he had forgotten to consider just how much stuff he would need to carry.

"We won't have the river to dunk the steamed trombe wood, but that was all just to make the bark easier to peel by exposing it to cold water after getting steamed. Right now the well water will do just fine. We'll have to get fresh water from the well several times to keep it from warming up, but that's better than going to the forest, right?"

Despite all I said, Lutz's expression was still dark with worry. "Yeah, it'll be easier. But what about after that? Just storing the white bark, right?"

"I'd like to store it after peeling it down to the white bark, but it's

not like black bark can't be stored too, so it'll be fine. It might be more annoying to peel the black bark, but going into the river in this season would be suicide, so let's not even think about it."

With all his worries gone, Lutz's expression brightened again. "Whew. What a relief," he said to himself repeatedly, walking a bit faster than before.

...I'll ask Mom and Tuuli for help once I get home, then I'll work on steaming the wood tomorrow. I walked on while thinking about my plans for tomorrow, but my thoughts started to drift, maybe because I was hungry. *We have a steamer, so I kinda want to eat a hot sweet potato with melted butter on it... I don't know if there are literal sweet potatoes in this world, but there are things similar to potatoes. If I bring potatoes tomorrow and Lutz brings butter, I guess we can eat buttered potatoes tomorrow? That sounds nice. Both my body and heart agree. Okay, let's do it.*

We arrived at the well by our homes in no time as I drifted off in sweet fantasies. Lutz stopped and turned around. "Myne, I'll come get you after the wood's delivered and I've grabbed the key. Just wait at home until I drop by."

"Uh huh. Don't forget to bring butter tomorrow, okay?" I gave him a big wave goodbye and rushed into my building.

As I climbed the stairs, I could hear Lutz shouting in shock from outside the windows. "Huh?! What?! Butter?! Why butter?! What for?!"

Waaait, did I not tell him about it? Whoops, whoops.

We Went Ahead and Made Some

Dad went to bed right after supper, since he had been on morning shift. Quietly doing handiwork at the dinner table was the perfect way to kill time until our own bedtimes without disturbing his sleep. Once he was in the bedroom, I talked to Tuuli and Mom about the handiwork.

“Freida’s hair ornament is so popular that a lot of people are asking where they can buy them, so Benno asked me if I could start my winter handiwork early. He wants a lot of hairpins just like the one we made Tuuli.”

“...But, honey.”

Mom and Tuuli glanced at each other and looked at me with doubtful expressions. It was clear that while they could help, they didn’t want to do extra work at an already busy time.

That was about what I expected, so I took out two middle coppers from my tote bag as proof and clinked them onto the table. “I asked to be paid ahead on the first one. Benno will pay this much per flower part.”

Mom and Tuuli stood up immediately with a clatter and pulled the table closer to the hearth for the extra light, little though it was, without a word.

“Wait, what?” I was left sitting alone on my chair, stunned. Before I could even start to recover, Tuuli took three pairs of thin sewing needles from the sewing box and Mom brought the thread-packed basket out of the storage room. I climbed off the chair, overwhelmed at their perfect coordination.

As I weakly pulled my chair to the table, Mom spoke to me. “Myne, where’s the finished one we can use as an example?”

“Mmm? I gave it back to Tuuli already,” I said, leading Tuuli to quickly take her hairpin out of her own box. The noise she made rustling through her box made Dad call out asking what was going on, but Mom just said it was “nothing” and to “have a good night, dear.”

After getting my chair to the table, I climbed up onto it and saw that they had already finished preparing everything.

“Myne, what colors should we make?” asked Mom while rustling through the basket of thread, but the specific colors didn’t matter. All we had to do was make hair ornaments with the same design as Tuuli’s.

“We don’t know the hair colors and favorite colors of our individual customers, so he just wants us to make several of a bunch of different colors. You can just pick three different colors like Tuuli’s hairpin and make as many flowers as hers has.”

“Makes sense. How about white, yellow, and red?”

“Seems nice and cute to me.”

As soon as I gave my approval, Mom began knitting at a furiously high pace. She knew how to make the hair ornaments from prior experience, and thus had nothing holding her back. A small flower that would take me about fifteen minutes to sew only took her five minutes.

“Uh huh, the more colors to pick from the better. I think I’m going to go with white, yellow, and blue. The same colors my own hairpin has. What colors will you pick, Myne?” giggled Tuuli while picking out her favorites from the basket filled with a rainbow of colors. It seemed she really liked the hair ornament I made for her, which made me happy.

“I think I’ll go with pink, red, and green. Green flowers kind of look like normal plants, which is super cute, right?”

“Mhm. Really cute. But... Hey, Myne. How do you make these?” Tuuli, seemingly not wanting to interrupt Mom’s intense focus, scooted her chair next to mine. Since I had made Tuuli’s hairpin as a gift for her, she had no experience making the same kind of flowers.

“It’s not that hard. You just do this, and this...” I showed Tuuli how to make the small flowers while I sewed them. They were much easier to sew than Freida’s roses, so Tuuli mastered the technique in no time.

“Okay. Thanks!” Tuuli scooted her chair back to its original position and began quietly sewing.

We kept working for a while. After finishing my third flower, I glanced up and saw an overwhelming difference between how many I had made and how many were on the table. Mom had already finished enough small flowers to make an entire ornament, and Tuuli had six small flowers in front of her. *Wowee. Here’s two sewing beauties for you.*

Both Mom and Tuuli were sewing so much faster than me it was laughable. They were finishing flowers in the blink of an eye. Not even my history making weird arts and crafts helped me compare to their speed and the beauty of their flowers. I returned to work, resolving to take my time so that, at the very least, my hairpins wouldn’t look noticeably worse than theirs when compared.

Winter handiwork was normally something you did to pass the boring, boring time you had way too much of when you were stuck inside over the winter, which meant it usually involved a lot of casual chatter. But right now we were crowded around a dark table late at

night, working purely for profit. Few words were exchanged and we all focused entirely on our work.

“All done! What now?” Tuuli’s head shot up, her expression gleaming with joy. In front of her were twelve flowers, four of each color. Plenty for a nice bouquet.

“You’re fast, Tuuli. I’m impressed. Ummm, now we just sew them to scraps of cloth, and... ah! Cloth! I forgot to include those in the budget!”

“For handiwork like this, it’s standard for families to buy their own materials, so we can just use what we already have,” said Mom, having already started to sew her flowers onto a scrap of cloth to complete the hairpin.

“...I’ll either ask Benno to pay or ask him for cloth.”

“You don’t need to go that far, he’s already paying us two entire middle coppers each.”

Um... Just how bad is the pay Mom usually gets for this stuff?

As I decided to ask Benno to recalculate our budget with the cloth in mind before we started for real, Tuuli went to the storage room and grabbed a scrap of cloth.

“Just follow Mom’s example and sew the flowers onto the cloth, making sure not to bundle up too many of the same color in one place. If you sew the flowers so the cloth beneath them is blocked from view, it’ll look like a bouquet of small flowers.”

“Mhm, got it.”

Once Tuuli finished the hairpin she had started, we called it a night. In the end I only managed to finish half of one myself, but Tuuli finished one and Mom finished eighty percent of her second one.

“Okay, here’s your paaay.”

“Yay!”

I gave each of them two middle coppers and placed their finished hairpins into my box.

“Now then, girls, run along to bed. I’ll join you once I finish what I’ve started.” Mom pointed at the eighty-percent-finished hairpin and gave a troubled smile. That wouldn’t take long at all given how fast she worked. Tuuli and I tip-toed into the bedroom, making sure not to wake Dad.

...So why were there two finished hairpins on the table when I woke up? *Did you stay up late, Mom? Tuuli’s mad since she wanted to keep working too.*

“No fair, Mom! How come only you get to work late!”

“Sorry, dear. I’ll be more careful next time. Now now, you’ll be late for work.” Mom apologized to Tuuli, who was puffing out her cheeks, and encouraged her on to work.

Tuuli shot back, “I’ll make lots of them when I get home!” and

dashed outside. After seeing her go, I picked up Mom's two hairpins and placed four middle coppers onto the table in their place.

"I'll pay you now before you go to work, Mom, so I don't forget to later. Also, I'm going to Benno's today. If I don't completely finish the ornaments with Lutz's pins and get paid for them, I won't be able to pay you two for the next hairpins."

"Okay. Be careful, dear, and say hello to Benno for me." As Mom put the middle coppers into her bag, her smile told me that she planned to work just as hard tonight.

The door shut and I heard the sound of a turning key. I kept waving with a smile until I couldn't hear footsteps anymore, then sighed. *Thiiii isn't good. The power of money is simply too strong. I didn't expect them to speed up this much. I especially didn't expect Mom to stay up so late. If I don't sell the finished hairpins and stock up on cash now, I'll probably run out of coins by tonight.*

"Well, peeling the trombe wood comes first today."

I didn't know when exactly Lutz would be coming, so I needed to get ready and wait.

First, the almost-potatoes known as potatoffels. Similar names, I know. Next, my slate, slate pens, and calculator so we can study while the wood gets steamed. Can't forget the supply order set since I'm planning to go to Benno's. Might as well grab my needles and thread to finish my half-done hairpin. Which means bringing a scrap of cloth and my seven small flowers. Plus other needles and thread to attach them to the pins and cloth.

Once everything was ready, I started sewing little flowers while waiting for Lutz to arrive. After finishing about two of them, I heard a knock on the door and Lutz asking if I was home.

"Morning, Lutz. So, about the pins. Have you finished any?"

"Yeah, I've got five. What about'm?"

"Bring them all with you. I'm bringing my needles and thread, 'cause I need to finish the hairpins while the water's boiling so I can sell them to Benno. We already finished four of them last night," I said, which made Lutz's eyes shoot open.

"Wait, what?! That's way too fast! Didn't you say making those flowers was real hard and took a lot of time...?"

"Mmm, well, not even I thought they'd work this fast. I'm honestly kind of panicking here."

"...Alright. You just need me to get the pins, right? Anything else?"

Yes. There was one thing that I couldn't let Lutz forget today, under any circumstances. "What about the butter? Did you get some ready?"

"I thought I just misheard you... I'll go get some. Lock the door and I'll meet you downstairs." It seemed that he hadn't brought butter

with him. That was close; I nearly missed out on eating the ideal potato. I saw Lutz off as he climbed down the stairs, then got my stuff and went outside.

“So cooold.” Our storage building was frosty cold, so much so that being outside felt warmer thanks to the sunlight. There was no place to start a fire inside the building, so we made plans to boil the trombe wood in front of it instead.

We deposited our stuff inside the building and went outside. Lutz stacked rocks next to each other to prepare a spot for the pot, and I lined up the trombe wood in the steamer. It got filled up in no time.

“Lutz, I think we’ll need another layer for the steamer.”

“One second.”

In the past we didn’t have to steam too much wood at once, but this time we had to steam all the materials we had immediately. We had prepared ahead of time to steam two layers at once, so Lutz got the other steamer out of the storage building.

“Should I go ahead and put the pot on the stones?”

“Uh huh, I’ll be done lining up the wood soon.” I finished putting the trombe wood in the steamers while Lutz locked the pot into place. I then used a knife to carve crosses into the potatoes I brought so they would cook better and placed them into the steamers as well before putting the tops on. Twenty minutes of steaming later and we would have delicious buttered potatoes ready (well, delicious buttered potatoffels, that is).

I started sewing flowers while the fire licked the pot from below. It took me about fifteen minutes to make each flower, so considering how long cleaning up would take, it was the perfect way to kill time while waiting for the potatoes.

“Lutz, you should make some strips out of the bamboo still in the storage building. Make their tips pointy.”

“Huh? Why?”

“What do you mean, why? So we can make sure the (buttered potatoes) are ready.”

“Huh? Myne, uh, what’re you doing?”

“I was thinking I should go ahead and cook them if we’re going to be using the steamers anyway... Do you not want any?”

“Of course I want some! Those buttered-whatevers are food, right?!”

Aaah... I see. For some reason, ‘buttered potatoes’ didn’t get translated. I figured the same idea would exist here since this world has sautéed potatoffels with butter.

The moment Lutz realized food was in the steamers, he got to work making pointy bamboo sticks. “Hey, Myne. Are those buttered-whatevers good?”

“I like them a lot. Honestly, you’ve probably had something just like them before already.”

It took longer than expected for the water in the pot to start boiling, likely due to its size, so it wasn’t until I finished two flowers that enough time seemed to have passed. It was about time to check on the potatoes.

“Okay, Lutz. Open the lid!”

I waited for Lutz to open the lid, standing on one of Ralph’s failed products for extra height with a stick in my right hand and a pair of chopsticks in my left.

“Myne, don’t put your face over it!”

The moment Lutz took off the lid, white steam burst out into the sky. Once the hot steam faded, I opened my eyes and saw yellow steaming potatoes next to the trombe wood.

I stabbed one with my stick. It slid right in without the potato falling apart, which was a good sign. I swapped the stick for my chopsticks and readied them.

“Lutz, I need a plate!”

“You think I have one?!”

“One of the flat boards will do. Also, get the butter ready.”

“You should have done all this instead of making flowers! Get your priorities straight!”

“Ngh. You’re completely right.”

I picked up the potatoes with chopsticks, put them on the board, and immediately had Lutz put the cover back on. I then jumped off the stand, wrenched open the cross cuts with my knife, and got some butter in there as soon as possible. The smell of melting butter was absolutely heavenly. My hype was building, but Lutz slumped over the second he saw the potatoes come out of the steamer.

“...What, they’re just potatoffels? I thought this was gonna be some awesome new recipe, Myne.” He was disappointed, probably due to having eaten so many of them before. They were grown in bulk around this area, so potatoffels ended up on many a dinner plate. It was hard not to get tired of them. I could understand his disappointment, considering they still had their skin on them and weren’t even prepared with a meal.

“Mhm, mhm. I know there’s a lot of recipes around here that involve eating potatoffels with butter. You don’t have to eat them if you don’t want to.”

“...I’ll have some.”

I ignored Lutz’s pouting and peeled off the skin of just the top of a potato before wrapping it in my apron so I could hold it without getting burned. I then held up the still-steaming potatoes and took a big bite. The outside part alone was fairly cool thanks to the cold air,

but the inside was hot and fell apart in my mouth. It had a smoky scent due to being steamed alongside trombe wood, which gave an accent to the butter and flavored the potato in a way I'd never tasted at home.

I put a hand on my cheek and wiggled with glee over the flavor as Lutz sighed out white breath nearby and then took a bite from his. Immediately, his eyes shot open and he stared at his potato. He looked between me and the potato, stunned, and then took another confused bite. "...So good! Why?! This tastes totally different from the cooked potatoes I've had at home!"



“It’s ’cause I steamed them. Steaming potatoes packs them full of nutrition and flavor. Since I steamed them with trombe wood, it’s almost like I smoked them, which adds a lot of extra fancy flavor.”

While we ate the hot and tasty potatoffels, I told Lutz about how I had made hairpins with Mom and Tuuli last night. “...I’m not kidding, either. Mom and Tuuli were both sewing so fast I couldn’t believe it. It sounds like they’re going to work just as hard tonight, too. I didn’t even finish a single one. Yet another reminder of how useless I am.”

“Don’t sweat it too much, it’s just sewing.”

“What about you, Lutz? How did last night go for you?”

Lutz regretfully licked his fingers after eating the last of his potatoffel and shook his head. “Nobody cared about what I was doing. They all blew me off when I asked for help.”

“Okay. Want me to cast a magic spell on your family too?”

“Magic?”

“Uh huh. We can stop by your place after Benno pays us, I’ll show you then.”

We were done eating, so Lutz drew water from the well for us so we could drink with our hands. I then went to get the calculator, which I placed in front of Lutz.

“Mmm, okay. We finished four hairpins today. I had Benno pay us ahead of time for one, so we’re getting paid for three today, and each is worth eleven middle coppers. So, how much is he going to pay us?”

Lutz thought about the question seriously and began moving his fingers across the calculator. “Thirty-three coppers!”

“Mhm, that’s right. Good job! Okay, so you need to make twenty pins total. You made five yesterday. How many more do you need to make?”

Lutz looked troubled. As one might expect, he still wasn’t fast at doing math involving multiple digits even with a calculator at hand. Since he couldn’t reflexively do one-digit mental math, he had to tediously go through every step on the calculator, so for now I put aside the calculator and instead wrote some basic addition problems on his slate.

“You should learn this stuff first. It’s important that you memorize these basic problems so that you can answer them immediately.”

As Lutz mumbled to himself, memorizing the questions, I got back to work finishing my hairpin. By the time I did, noon had passed and the trombe wood was all nicely steamed.

“Lutz, get more water and take a step back.”

I used my sticks to drop the trombe wood into the bucket of water piece by piece. Once cooled, Lutz took them out and placed them on a nearby board. The water wasn’t flowing like in the river, so the bucket

water quickly got pretty warm.

"The water's warm now. One sec." Lutz drew fresh water from the well, so I sat down and peeled off the black bark while waiting.

Once we had new water, we added more trombe wood. And so the cycle repeated. After all the wood was out of the steamers, I hurriedly peeled all the black bark off before it cooled down entirely while Lutz cleaned up the pot and steamers. Our work for today would be finished after we put the bark on nails to dry inside the storage building.

"Aaand done!"

"Alright, same here!"

My fingers were still tingly from handling the hot bark, so much so that the cold air felt pretty nice. I inhaled deeply, filling my lungs with it.

"...Huh?" I wasn't feeling depressed. I wasn't feeling uneasy about anything. All I felt was the relief of finishing a good day's work. And yet, the devouring heat within my body was going on a rampage. I reflexively tensed up to try and contain the heat within me.

"Woah, Myne?!" Lutz, seeing me freeze up, hurriedly shook my shoulders.

I wanted to say "Don't shake me, it's hard to concentrate," but I was clenching my teeth too hard to say anything. I reached out with my right hand to grab Lutz, and he immediately clasped it with both of his hands.

"What's going on?! You've got a fever out of nowhere! Myne, are you alright?! Can you hear me?!"

I focused on the pressure from his tight grip and held back the waves of heat. I had normally contained it by imagining throwing a net around it and sucking it inside, but now it was like it was shooting tiny daggers of heat to cut through the net. ...*Get back inside, already!*

Out of every heat attack I had ever experienced, it took longer to push the heat back this time than any time before. I was so exhausted after the heat pulled back that I couldn't even speak. Or stand, for that matter. I collapsed onto the ground, held upright only by Lutz, who was holding me up with his hands still clasped around mine.

"Wha? The fever's gone? The heck is going on? Hey! Myne, are you alright?!"

"... It's the devouring. Don't you remember what Freida said?" I answered with a heavy sigh as Lutz looked at me, worried.

"Hold on a second. You didn't look sick or weak at all like you normally do before getting a fever."

"It happens out of nowhere. Normally it takes some strong emotions to come out, but lately it happens whenever my heart stirs even a little... Aaah, that surprised me."

I was a little too shocked for the word “surprised” to be accurate, but Lutz was still gripping my hand and looking close to tears. I didn’t want to worry him any further and thus forced a weak smile.

“Can’t we fix it somehow?”

“Again, don’t you remember what Freida said? The cure or whatever is really expensive. Benno said the same thing.” The blood drained from Lutz’s face as he paled, and I went on, “Well, that’s how it is. Let’s go to Benno’s so I can make a little money to try and fix this.” I thought to myself that if the heat got any worse I probably wouldn’t be able to contain it, but I just kept smiling.

Lutz let go of my hand, gritting his teeth, and turned around. “I’ll carry you to the store. That’s... That’s all I can do.”

“What do you mean, that’s all you can do? You help me out all the time doing lots of things.”

“Whatever, just get on already!” urged Lutz, his voice trembling a little. I pretended not to notice that and got onto his back, but I could feel the tears dripping down his cheeks and onto my arms.

I genuinely felt bad. In my Urano days, I had been so focused on books that I didn’t have any friends that would have cried for me like this. And despite having read so many books, I didn’t know what to say to him.

...You’re just too nice, Lutz. You stay with me no matter how much of a useless waste of space I am. You accepted me even though you know I’m not the real Myne.

“You don’t need to feel guilty, no matter what, even if the devouring kills me. It comes out of nowhere and nobody can stop it. And... I’m not going to let it beat me yet. I still haven’t made a book.”

I heard Lutz sniff, but he didn’t answer.

We arrived at the store just as Mark, looking worried, and Benno, looking frustrated, were leaving. It seemed that the guard had gone inside to get them after seeing me on Lutz’s back.

“Haaah... Good grief.” Benno let out a sigh as he walked up to me, then immediately hefted me up and literally tossed me in Mark’s direction.

“Bhgyaaaah?!”

“Oof?!” Mark thankfully caught me, but still. What was Benno thinking, tossing around an exhausted sick person like that? Before I could complain, Lutz looked up from the ground for the first time since we started walking here.

“Lutz, come with me to my room. Just Lutz.” And before Lutz could say anything either, Benno jutted his jaw in the direction of the store, brows furrowed.

His momentum having grinded to a halt, Lutz vanished into the store with Benno. He turned back to look at me once out of worry. His

face was a mess of tears and snot.

“Ah, Lutz...”

“Lutz will be fine. More importantly, did you come here to discuss something? It’s cold outside, let us talk inside.” Mark, still carrying me, walked into the store and prepared warm tea for me. I warmed my hands and body with it while discussing the sale of the hairpins we just finished.

“Oh, Lutz. Did you finish talking with Benno? Look, look! They bought the hairpins we made!” I was worried while waiting for Lutz to come out, but when he did, he looked calmer than before despite his puffy eyes. He smiled a little after seeing the money I was holding out to him.

“Woah, that’s a lot of money.”

“I think we’ll be fine for two or three days with this much.”

“Just two or three?”

Lutz had calmed down enough to chat casually. I sighed in relief. *I don’t know what Benno said to him, but I would have expected nothing less from the master of diplomacy.*

Speak of the devil, Benno followed Lutz out and shrugged like nothing had happened at all. “Now’s not the time to be chatting. If you’re done here, hurry on home and sleep, Myne. Lutz told me you’re not feeling well.” Benno gestured us away, then remembered something and added onto what he had said. “Mark, go with them. Bit dangerous for kids like them to be carrying that much money around.”

“Understood, sir.”

He had paid us in all middle coppers to make it easier for us to pay Mom and Tuuli. Thirty three coins would clink and clang quite a lot while we walked. Just holding a few in our hand wasn’t a problem, but the sound of clanking money would make we pre-baptism kids stand out a lot. The risk of being mugged was far too high. It was best to just entrust Mark with the money and leave it at that.

Mark exchanged a glance with Benno, then picked me up along with the bag of money.

“I-I can walk on my own, Mr. Mark!”

“I would be more quick to believe you if Lutz had not carried you here. Please be a good girl and for the sake of everyone’s mental health, allow me to carry you.” In other words: *“You’re sick, so shut up.”*

I had no argument. With my head hanging, I stopped flailing my arms and legs.

On the way back, I talked to Mark about what we were doing with our winter handiwork and did my best to explain it in a way that Lutz would fully understand as well. This could be considered part of his

apprentice training.

There were three things Lutz would have to do to ensure getting his family's help went smoothly. One, he would need to record on a board how many pins each of them carved. Two, he needed to hide that board somewhere safe to prevent anyone from messing with it. Three, since Lutz was getting four middle coppers as a handling fee per pin, he needed to add those four together on the calculator to keep the total in mind.

Lutz said he didn't feel great about fussing over money when his family was involved, but Mark assured him that learning to do business with one's family was an essential part of the path toward becoming a proper merchant.

Myne Collapses

I knocked on Lutz's door. "Hi, Mrs. Karla. Is Lutz there?"

Since Lutz said that his family wouldn't help him, I decided to visit and help him out a little bit.

"My my, hello Myne. Lutz! Myne's here!" Before Lutz could react to his mother's call, his older brothers were already crowded around the door, eyes shining eagerly.

"What's up? Got a new recipe?"

"We'll help you. What's step one?"

Sorry to disappoint. I was just visiting to convince them to help Lutz with his winter handiwork. "I'm not here for cooking. I'm just bringing Lutz his pay."

"His pay?"

"Uh huh. Lutz is helping me with my winter handiwork and this is his pay." I pushed through the wall of brothers and stood in front of Lutz. I then slowly paced one middle copper after another onto his palm in full view of his brothers.

"You made five pins, so you get five middle coppers. One, two, three, four, five. All there?" I could tell that his brothers all had their eyes locked on the clinking coins in Lutz's hand. I even heard one of them gulp.

"Hey, Myne. By helping with your handiwork, are you talking about like, the pointy wood sticks Lutz was making earlier?"

Hook, line, and sinker, I thought while smiling at Ralph. "Uh huh. I'm making hair ornaments and he's making the pin part of them for me. One middle copper per pin."

"He's getting a whole middle copper for those?!" shouted Zasha, his eyes going wide and then locking onto Lutz's palm.

Sieg shook his head in disbelief, then looked me square in the eyes. "...Myne. It doesn't have to be Lutz helping you, right? Can I help too?" I could imagine that Sieg was speaking for all of his brothers in that moment. They were each looking at me with grim determination.

Still smiling, I nodded at them. "Of course, anyone can help. But they all have to be the same size and smooth enough to not get stuck on hair, so lazy work won't cut it."

The moment the brothers heard that, they all started to brag about their carving skills.

“Myne, I’m way better at working with wood than Lutz. I do it at work every day, y’know.”

“Hey, I’m better than Lutz too.”

“And I’m more experienced than any of y’all, remember?”

Lutz listened to his brothers brag with pure shock in his eyes.

“Hold on, hold on. Didn’t all three of you say you’d never help me with something as boring as making pins? Didn’t you all blow me off and tell me to do it on my own? Actually, I remember you all calling the pins stuppghhph!”

Zasha clamped his hand over Lutz’s mouth and glared at him.

“You didn’t tell us nothing about the pay.”

“You were gonna try to keep it all to yourself, weren’t you?”

I could guess that Lutz had actually told them about the pay, but they had either ignored him or thought he was making it up. It felt bad seeing him surrounded, so I went ahead and gave him a helping hand. “So you three will make them instead? Five each, please. I won’t be able to keep up if you make more than that, so don’t try to make too many. I’ll come for them in three days. Is that enough time? I know you all have jobs, so...”

Lutz’s brothers dropped him immediately and grinned shining grins at my suggestion. They thumped their chests and said it would be no problem.

“Yeah, leave it to us. Won’t even take three days.”

“Yeah, we’ll be done in no time.”

“Quality is more important than speed,” I said. “I won’t be able to use poorly made ones, so those’ll just get thrown out. Oh and also, ask Lutz about what wood to use and how big to make them. Bye bye! See you in three days.”

I pumped a fist in Lutz’s direction, silently wishing him good luck. Everything was ready for him now; his brothers should be ready and willing to do his handiwork. I had done all I could, it was up to him to follow up and make sure things went smoothly. *Good luck, Lutz. Think like a merchant!*

Three days passed after Lutz’s older brothers promised to make the pins for the hair ornaments. I spent those three days inside, sewing small flowers. The devouring heat within me was getting more active, stirring inside of my body and making me feel bad enough that I didn’t really want to go outside. I would be hit with fevers in the middle of the night and left exhausted until morning, leaving me unwilling to move. To be honest, I was in constant fear of being attacked by the devouring heat and collapsing at any moment.

Amid all that, I finished two ornaments while stuck inside. I ultimately made just three out of the twenty that Benno wanted, and

Mom and Tuuli made the rest. The difference in our speed was stunning. The two of them at some point began to compete for speed while sewing the flowers. Tuuli sped up, and by the third day they had collectively sewn twelve sets. They were now in the middle of finishing the last two.

“Mom, Tuuli, I’m going to Lutz’s for a bit. They’ve made the pin parts for our hair ornaments, so I need to pay them too.”

“Be safe.” The two of them replied in unison, both so focused on sewing flowers that they didn’t even look up.

I put fifteen middle coppers in a pouch and left home. I climbed down the stairs, left the building, cut through the plaza by the well, and started climbing the stairs of the building almost directly across from mine.

Lutz lived on the sixth floor, but they were renting two floors’ worth of space, so his place was larger than mine. There were a ton of stairs inside, but they were wide enough that even with four boys it didn’t feel cramped. Though according to Lutz there were a lot of tools lying around, and they had rented the extra space specifically to have makeshift workshops at home, so there wasn’t actually a ton of living space.

I knocked on the door and said my name. Soon, the door creaked open and Karla poked her head out. “Hi, Mrs. Karla. I’m here to buy the pins, are Lutz’s older brothers here?”

“You bet, they’ve been waiting for you since morning,” said Karla with a smile, before her face clouded over a little and she lowered her voice. “...Now, Myne. Is Lutz really trying to become a merchant? He’s being so stubborn about it that everyone’s all tense at home. But no matter what, he won’t give up on it. Which is ridiculous, a silly dream isn’t worth fighting with your family over. Don’t you think so?”

I had heard from Lutz that his relationship with his family wasn’t great, but it was even worse than I had expected. I was worried for him, but he probably wouldn’t give in to the pressure. He had resolved to become a merchant even if it meant becoming a live-in apprentice.

“I don’t know what to tell you, Mrs. Karla. Lutz’s future is up to him.” An outsider like me butting into a family’s problems would just make things worse, so I just shrugged it off.

Karla’s mouth bent into a frown, signaling that she had expected ready agreement from me. “Goodness gracious. Daughters always listen to their parents, but boys will be boys. I’m getting real tired of it.”

“And you have four boys, too. That must be rough.”

I kept to myself that I had no intention of living my life according to my parents’ wishes either. As long as Karla kept complaining, her

children would hide inside the house to avoid getting wrapped into listening to her like they probably had to all the time already.

If I wanted to get inside, I'd have to smile and nod until she was satisfied. Unlike my Mom, who was quite fine spending ages talking with other mothers by the snowy well, I had no interest in standing inside a cold doorway just to talk.

"I wonder if there's any way I can make my boys realize how much I struggle for that. Not too long ago, I was..."

Ooooh no. I feel like she's going to keep going for a while. Just as I started to debate leaving and coming back later, Lutz called out from within.

"Hey, Mom. Myne came to buy the pins, didn't she? We're in kinda a hurry 'cause the snow's about to fall. Also, she gets sick easily. Let her inside already."

"Ah, good point. Come on in."

"Thank you."

Lutz and I exchanged glances that said *"I owe you my life,"* and *"Sorry, my mom likes to talk a lot,"* before shrugging.

I had broken through the gatekeeper and successfully entered Lutz's house. As expected, it was warmer than the outside.

"Lutz, are your older brothers finished? Have you practiced your math?"

"Yeah."

"...Myne, are you teaching Lutz math?" said Karla in a sharp tone, having been listening in on us from behind.

I ignored the clear displeasure in her voice and smiled. "Uh huh. I'm doing math work to help out at the gate, so..."

"Right, you help your father's job. Sure wish Lutz would help his father too."

Women of this world generally helped their parents' work, married a man introduced to them by their parents, and then helped their husbands work. If this were a farming town in the country, they would help with farm work, marry a farmer, then become a farmer themselves.

In other words, as the daughter of a soldier, it was expected that in the future I'd work a small job while primarily supporting my soldier husband. Soldiers had such unstable work hours that being married to one was quite difficult, and having a soldier relative was a big qualifier for becoming a soldier's wife.

Karla likely interpreted me working at the gate with my father as me preparing for my future in various ways. Unfortunately for her, I was charging right toward a job as a merchant apprentice and had absolutely no intention of becoming a soldier's wife.

Inside I saw Lutz's brothers holding their pins and waiting eagerly.

I walked up to them and immediately they all thrust their carved pins in my direction.

“Look, Myne. All done.”

“Wasn’t nothin’ for us.”

“Pretty sure these are all perfect.”

“Woah woah woah! Line up! Oldest first!”

Having all the pointy pins jabbing toward my eyes was honestly scary. I waved my hands in front of my face to avoid them. The three of them quickly lined up in order of age and I paid them while checking each pin individually. None of them had slacked at all. I reflexively smiled as I saw the smooth, well-carved pins.

“Yup, these pins are all better than the ones Lutz made. I expected nothing less from pros. My sister and mom are better at me than sewing, too. Which brings me to my main point. Do you three want to make these same pins as your winter handiwork? It’ll take until spring before I can pay you, but they’ll be worth the same amount.”

“Yeah, leave it to us.” The three of them agreed with broad grins. Now, Lutz could focus entirely on his studying.

“Lutz, did you do the math? How much was it?”

“Six thousand lions, or six big coppers. Right...?”

Lutz’s older brothers had made fifteen pins. Each had a handling fee of four middle coppers, which totaled six large coppers. The handling fee alone was worth a lot.

“Uh huh, that’s right! Keep studying math just like that and you’ll be fine. I’ll take these pins home and finish the hairpins today so we can go to the store tomorrow, okay?”

“Sounds good.”

By the time I got home with the pins, Mom and Tuuli had finished their last sets of flowers. I sewed the flowers onto the pins and they were done for real.

“I’ll bring these to the store tomorrow and get paid for the rest. You two were so fast I couldn’t keep up with the money he gave me.”

When Benno gave me his request I thought we would make ten at best, but here we were with twenty of them. I hadn’t expected Mom to speed up so much after seeing the money, and I hadn’t expected Tuuli to be so fast after getting used to making them.

“Eheh, I got pretty fast, huh?”

“You were amazing, Tuuli. We’ll get lots of winter handiwork done this year.”

“Mhm, I’ll do my best and make lots of them!”

I could only applaud as Tuuli took another firm step forward on her journey toward being a sewing beauty. Her path was one I could not follow, but it was one I could respect.

The next day, I took the finished hair ornaments to Benno's store with Lutz. We walked along the stone road and Lutz broke the silence.

"Hey, Myne. Do you know about anything else we could sell?"

"Lutz?"

"Benno told me that curing the devouring costs a lot of money. I'm thinking the paper will sell a lot once spring comes, but like, maybe having more stuff to sell would be smart. If you can think of anything, I'll definitely make it, no matter what."

I could tell that he was sincerely worried about me, so I decided to try and think of new products to sell in hopes of curing my devouring.

"Mmm. Out of everything we've sold so far, luxury products for the rich were worth the most."

Rich people could naturally spend more money on household goods than poor people. The hair ornaments, for instance, increased significantly in value when better designed and made using more expensive thread. Paper, too, was more valuable when made with trombe wood. Which meant that the best way to make a lot of money would be to make products that the richer classes wanted.

"But I'm not sure what the rich people here want. Rinsham, hairpins, and even paper were all extremely common things in my old life."

"The world you came from must've been a wild place."

Lutz knew that I was from another world and seemed more interested than weirded out by my past memories, so when it was just us, I didn't go out of my way to not talk about Japan. I was so nostalgic for home that I only ever said positive things about it, so Lutz's impression of Japan was probably biased toward it being some kind of paradise. And to be fair, it was a paradise to me, given how it was filled with libraries and books. I would still like to return there if given the chance.

"Maybe I could use (dollar stores) as inspiration and make improved versions of daily necessities? Like making better soap, or making fancier candles? The herb candles I made last year were pretty good, all things considered."

"Herb candles?" Lutz furrowed his brows in confusion.

"The candles we were making last year for winter smelled bad, so I put some herbs in them to balance it out. It made some of the candles smell nice and some of them smell even worse. My mom banned me from doing it again this year thanks to that."

While stuck in bed I'd offered to help with the candles, and not only did she immediately say no, she forbade me from getting out of bed at all. She was definitely more worried about the candles than my health.

“You sure are doing a lot of things I don’t know about, huh?”

“Ngh... You can’t avoid a little trial and error sometimes. Anyway, people like the lace and baskets I made, so maybe I should bust out some more tricks I learned from doing (arts and crafts)... Mmm, I can’t make (bead accessories) without (beads), art made out of pressed paper probably wouldn’t sell, and I can’t make (tole paintings) without paint, sooo...”

“Yeah, I don’t understand a word you’re saying. Did you think of anything or what?”

In order to follow up on any of my ideas, I would need to start with making tools, just like I did with paper. The thought of that alone killed my motivation. I just couldn’t bring myself to care about things that didn’t have a direct positive impact on my life.

“Um, Lutz. I just realized something really bad. The biggest problem with thinking of new products to sell is that I can’t get fired up about making tools for things that aren’t important to me personally.”

“Get fired up! Do you wanna die?! We’re talking about your life here!” roared Lutz.

“Don’t worry, I can still get fired up over things that are important to me, so how about we sell books next?”

“Hold up! You’re the one who said that books won’t sell since nobody but you cares that much about them! Think of things that will sell!” said Lutz, getting so agitated that tears formed in his eyes.

I patted him on his shoulders. “Lutz, you’re getting too riled up. Calm down.”

“You’re the one riling me up, Myne!”

“That’s true. Sorry, sorry,” I said, consoling my friend, when suddenly someone clamped their hands around my head from behind. “Hyaaaah?!”

“Just what do you two think you’re doing? Having a comedy show for laughs? You want people to laugh at you, huh?”

I snapped back to reality after hearing Benno’s familiar voice and looked around, seeing that indeed people were looking at us and laughing. Blushing red in embarrassment, I glared at Benno purely to vent my frustration. “And why are you here, Mr. Benno?”

“On my way back from checking out my workshops. What about you two?”

“We were bringing you the finished hairpins to sell.”

“Alright. Let’s go then.” Benno, impatient as he was, hefted me up and began briskly walking forward. I could see over Benno’s shoulder that Lutz was jogging to catch up.

He didn’t set me down once we entered the store. He carried me all the way to his office before setting me down at the usual table. I

climbed onto the chair to sit and took the hairpins out of my tote bag, lining them up on the table one by one. "These plus the past ones add up to twenty hairpins. Please check to make sure."

"...Alright, that's what I needed. My clients are in a big hurry since the baptism ceremony's next Earthday."

Nobody in my family was participating in this baptism ceremony so I let most of that go in one ear and out the other, but then I realized he had said a word I didn't know. "Um, Lutz. What's Earthday? I've never heard of that before."

"Huh?! Whaddaya mean 'What's Earthday'...? Earthday is Earthday. Right?" Lutz looked at Benno helplessly, unable to explain on his own.

Benno sighed and explained for me. "Waterday, Sproutday, Fireday, Leafday, Winday, Fruitday, and Earthday alternate on a cycle, yeah?"

Um... You're acting like I know this, but I don't. I've never heard any of those words before. I guess I can just think of them as the days of the week.

"In spring, snow melts into water that gives life to sprouting plants. In summer, the sun burns like fire and plants grow leaves. In autumn, the cool wind chills fruit as it grows. In winter, the life and earth of our land sleeps. That's why Earthday is considered a day of rest and stores are closed on it."

In other words, Earthday is this planet's equivalent of Sunday. I had figured that such a day existed since Mom regularly had a day off each week. But our home had no calendar and nobody had ever said the days of the week, so I never had the opportunity to learn them. *...Okay, the days of the week do have names. That's a relief.*

According to Benno, the baptism ceremony was held on the first "seasonal day" after a new season started. Spring's seasonal day was Waterday, summer's was Fireday, and winter's was Earthday.

Lutz nodded over and over, impressed. "Wow, so that's what the names meant. I knew'm, but I didn't know all that."

This world lacked anything like a weekly garbage day, so all I had to remember was that workers had a day off each week. I managed to go this long without learning all that since it was never directly relevant to me. When making plans with adults they always spoke in relative terms for convenience, which made me question whether the names of the days were in common use. The way Benno phrased things made it sound like they had something to do with the religion here. If I was going to learn more at my baptism anyway, I didn't need to push the subject.

"Okay, I understand now. Let's get back to business."

"Yeah, you don't usually say the names, so sure."

I sold the hair ornaments to Benno and put the middle coppers I would be paying Tuuli and Mom with into a pouch, which I then put into my tote bag. Everything else I sent to my savings by tapping my guild card against Benno's.

"Thank you again." With that done, I went ahead and started to leave so as to not disturb Benno's work, but before I could he grabbed my arm firmly.

"Did you think up any new products? I heard you two talking about that on the road."

I didn't know when he had started eavesdropping on us, but I could tell from the anticipation in his eyes that he had pushed Lutz in this direction during their little talk. *Well, I can't get too mad about that. It's true that I need the money.*

Over the past few days the devouring heat within me had been getting so much more active that merely containing it took most of my time and energy. To be honest, at this rate, it was hard to imagine that my body would last long enough for me to save up money. Nothing would come from me voicing my pessimism, however, so I just shrugged and rolled with Benno's subterfuge.

"What do you think would sell well, Mr. Benno? I think that to make the most profit, we should entice the richer classes with unusual items or squeeze them dry with expensive perishable goods."

"You're not wrong." Benno nodded with a grin.

"A product sold for its rarity will lose value once everyone has one, but perishable goods have to be bought constantly and will keep making money forever. Thinking about it that way, rinsham sure will make a lot of money, won't it?"

"Heh, probably." Benno had complete rights over the rinsham, so he just kept smiling confidently. He had finished making high-quality rinsham and was about to start selling it. I could imagine that something like that would make a lot of money for a long time.

"Most of the things I can think of are beauty products, I guess. We girls just love to obsess over beauty." Makeup was expensive, but regardless, there were a lot of women who wouldn't hesitate to drop whatever money they had in the hopes of looking a little prettier. I had no doubt that nobles and the wealthy in particular would gladly fork over cash if the products were effective.

Benno must have agreed with me, as his eyes gleamed and he leaned forward. "You got something?"

"Well... Personally, I would like high-quality soap with nice smells. Then there's the candles we use all winter. Maybe we could dress them up with herbs and colors to look fancier? Some of the herb candles I experimented with last year ended up looking pretty good."

I listed off everything I could think of, counting on my fingers as I

talked about potential products. Lutz's eyes were gleaming now, too. "Hey, Myne. Do you know how to make all those things?"

"Mmm, mostly. It'll be hard to get all the tools and materials, just like it was with the paper. And we'll need to do some trial and error first to iron out the problems, but it should be fine."

"Alright, let's do it." Benno pointed a finger at me and grinned. I could tell from his expression that he was calculating profit in his head.

I muttered "Don't count your chickens before they hatch" to myself and rubbed my temples. "Sheesh. Hold your horses, Mr. Benno. I can't even go outside until spring comes, and honestly... hyaaah?!"

...Honestly, will I even last until spring? Isn't my devouring getting pretty bad? The second those thoughts crossed my mind, the devouring heat within me exploded out of the internal container I had forced it into.

What's going on?! This isn't normal! It felt as if my entire body had turned into a pillar of fire. The devouring heat was so strong that I couldn't even try to contain it like usual. As I panicked internally, the heat rapidly spread through my body.

"Hey! Myne!" Lutz, realizing something was wrong, stood up with a terrified look on his face.

I lifted my head up and turned to him, but I couldn't stay in control of my body. It just kept shaking and shaking. My entire body felt hot and I knew that if I kept shaking I would fall right off the chair, but I couldn't stop. I couldn't force the heat back down.

When I fell off the chair, I only knew because I could see the ground rushing up to me.

"Look out, Myne!"

Even after hitting the ground, I felt no pain. The burning of the heat was too intense for me to feel anything. My eyes were still open, though, and I saw two pairs of feet rushing toward me over the carpet.

"Myne, are you alright?!" Lutz shook my body, and after briefly letting go in surprise from the sheer intensity of the heat, started shaking me again.

Benno turned to the door and shouted, not wanting to waste the time it'd take to ring the bell. "Not good! Mark, send a messenger to the geezer!"

"C'mon, Myne! Didn't you say you were gonna make a book?! Didn't you say you won't lose yet?! Myne! Stay strong..."

"Mark, get... carriage... to, hurry..."

Their shouts faded further and further into the distance. I eventually couldn't understand what they were saying anymore. And then, my consciousness flickered out.



Epilogue

“You don’t need to feel guilty, no matter what, even if the devouring kills me. It comes out of nowhere and nobody can stop it. And... I’m not going to let it beat me yet. I still haven’t made a book.”

Lutz thought back to what Myne had said the last time she caught a devouring fever. The circumstances were similar in that she’d passed out without showing any signs of being unhealthy. Now he was in front of her, shaking her as he felt her body heating up more and more. She wouldn’t open her eyes.

“Wake up, Myne! C’mon, open your eyes!” No matter how much Lutz cried out, Myne remained unconscious. She didn’t make a single peep. And to make matters worse, her fever showed no signs of going down like it did last time.

“C’mon, Myne. You always call yourself useless, but I need you. I can’t go on without you. I’m the one who’ll be useless without you!” Lutz clasped her hands and called out to her repeatedly, but her fever just kept going up, to the point where it felt like her body was about to melt. In fact, something resembling yellowish vapor was rising off her body like steam. There was just nothing Lutz could do.

He looked around and desperately set his sights on Benno, an adult who clearly had more power than him. “Even my family laughed at and ignored me for wanting to become a merchant, but Myne accepted my dream with a smile. When Otto was introducing us to you, I was actually so scared I wanted to run away, but Myne held my hand and got me through it. She still is, too. She’s teaching me everything I need to do to become a merchant. But here I am, useless to her. I can’t save her from the devouring. I... Please. Benno, sir, please save Myne. I can’t do it on my own. I’m just a kid, I’m poor, I can’t do anything...”

“I can’t.” Benno shot down Lutz’s desperate request with a calm, quiet voice.

“Why not?! You’re an adult, you have lots of money, you sell to nobles...” Lutz said everything he could in hopes of getting a different answer.

Benno looked down at Lutz and scrunched his face up bitterly. He gritted his teeth with frustration and shook his head. “My store is growing, but it’s only recently that nobles have started giving me business. I don’t have any significant connections. I’m still just another

commoner for them to rip off and underpay. The thing is... I'm just as powerless as you are."

"Not even you can save her...?" Lutz had never expected that. It took him a moment to believe that Benno, the owner of a large store that did business with nobles, was powerless to save Myne. If he couldn't do it, who could?

Just as Lutz was about to lose hope, he remembered that he knew someone who had cured their devouring. "But Freida said she cured hers... The guildmaster can save Myne!"

"Already finished negotiating with him." Benno let out a sigh and scratched his head. He put on a dry smile and shrugged. "He told me he could give her a little more time for the right price. Apparently he still has some crappy old magic tools he fished out from a financially collapsing noble family to save his granddaughter in the past. He'll sell her that tool, which'll probably break after a single use, for two small golds."

"G-Golds?!" Lutz had been excited over the small silvers he earned from selling paper, considering it enough to make him rich, but Benno said he needed small *golds* to save Myne. The price was so above his head that he felt dizzy.

"But that tool will only give her about half a year of time. One year at best. Paying once won't be enough — she'll be back in this situation before long. Especially since she's so small. It turns out that the devouring symptoms get worse as a person grows, so as she gets older they'll get even worse. You think I can afford to give that much money to a single apprentice? I can't."

Benno wasn't wrong. It would be absurd to expect him to pay that much. But giving up on that meant giving up on Myne's life.

"There's not much I can do. I'm buying Myne's weirdo knowledge to make as much money as possible with her. I arranged buying the magic tool from the geezer. That's all I can do. So, Lutz. What can you do?" Benno glared at Lutz with his sharp predatorial eyes, and Lutz glared back at him. If Benno couldn't do much of anything with all his age, power, intellect, and money, what could he expect Lutz to do?

"...I can't do anything. I'm a kid. I don't have power, smarts, money, nothing. If there's something I can do, tell me. I'll do anything for Myne!"

"Then don't let Myne worry about you. Don't be a burden to her," Benno replied immediately and Lutz gasped. That was exactly what he had been doing. Benno's expression softened just a little as he saw Lutz tear up with frustration, but his eyes remained sharp as he spoke again. "Listen, Lutz. This girl's not as young as she looks. At the very least, she's mature enough to smile and take care of others when she's suffering herself. Don't let her fool you. Don't take advantage of her

help.”

Memories of Myne weakly smiling after the devouring heat went away last time despite her ragged exhaustion flashed through Lutz’s mind. He remembered how relieved he had felt after seeing that smile.

“If you’re a man, don’t add to Myne’s burden. There’s no going back now. You have to do everything you can to buy her extra time. You said you would make anything she thought up? Then do it! Make each crazy product she thinks up! If you’ve got the time to cry, work instead. Think instead. Make money!” yelled Benno in a firm voice, causing Lutz to jerk his head up, eyes full of purpose. “...Heh. Finally got a good expression on your face.” Benno started to grin just as Mark rushed into the room.

“Sir, the guildmaster has responded. He said to bring her to him immediately. I have prepared a carriage.”

“Let’s go, Lutz.” Benno hefted up Myne’s limp, feverish body and raced to the carriage Mark had prepared. Lutz ran behind him and jumped inside too. “Go as fast as you can!”

What could he do? Would he be capable of saving Myne? The carriage shook as if reflecting the unstable state of Lutz’s heart as it raced up the main road toward the guildmaster’s house.

Corinna's Married Life

"Welcome home, Lady Corinna."

After meeting with Baron Blon's daughter and discussing what outfit she would like to wear for the upcoming Starbind Ceremony, I returned to the store and found Mark waiting for me.

"I have indeed returned, Mark. Did anything happen while I was gone?"

"Myne and Lutz arrived to sell the hairpins we spoke of. Shall I give a full report once you've settled in?"

Although my older brother Benno was managing the Gilberta Company, I was the true future heir of the store and thus received regular reports on its business through Mark.

"Would you be a dear and bring the hairpins with you?" I left it at that and went to my home on the third floor before changing clothes. I then headed to the room I still had on the second floor, which was my brother's home. My old room had become my office now that I was married and lived on the third floor with Otto.

"Please excuse me, Corinna. Here are the hairpins we purchased. They account for all the orders we received from various young ladies who have their baptism ceremony this winter or spring."

I immediately took a close look at the hairpins Mark had brought up. They were made of small flowers diligently sewn from thin thread of various colors. Each hairpin looked like a splendid bouquet of flowers, and I knew that there were many girls born in winter or spring who would die to have one, as throughout the winter and at the beginning of spring it was hard to acquire flowers for decoration.

"They are made from different colors, such that a customer can pick their favorite and potentially choose one that matches their hair. Additionally, at Myne's fervent request to make them as cheap as possible, Benno settled on selling them for three large coppers each."

It seemed that Myne, as a lowborn child of a poor family, wanted the hairpins to be priced so that even her neighbors could afford one. I was quite impressed that my brother agreed to sell them for such a low price. To think that a girl as young as Myne would have such a firm will and influence.

"Hmm. Were the hairpins she sold to the guildmaster earlier quite like these?"

"No, it would be fair to say that they were completely different

products. The thread was of the highest possible quality and the flowers were much larger.”

Myne had sold the special hairpins she made for the guildmaster’s granddaughter right after showing them to Benno, robbing me of the opportunity to see them. What a terrible shame.

“...Still, though. How in the world did Myne divine how to sew these?” I had seen the daughters of nobles wear real flowers frozen in time through magic, but never flowers sewn from thread like these. Those who lived in the southern part of the city were generally poor, and only on rare occasions dressed up at all. I found it extremely odd that Myne would know how to sew these despite being born and raised in such an environment.

Mark heard my murmur and shrugged with a small smile. “Neither I nor Benno know that. It seems, however, that he has chosen not to think about the origin of Myne’s products and where her knowledge comes from. He would rather use his time and effort to maximize profit than to seek answers to fruitless questions.”

In other words, as long as he profited, it didn’t matter. I smiled at my brother’s bold decision, then let out a sigh. “I don’t believe I can do the same, I’m afraid.” It was beyond me to trust, fund, support, and embrace as an apprentice a poor young girl solely to produce paper made from plants, a product entirely unrelated to the Gilberta Company clothing line. The Gilberta Company began when a woman made clothes in her workshop and her husband began selling them, which is why I was the heir of the store, but I knew for sure that the store would grow larger and faster with my brother at the helm.

Mark smiled at my weak confession and shook his head. “I am always surprised by Benno’s instincts and decisive nature, but I do not believe your instincts are anything to scoff at.”

“You think so?”

“A bolder decision was never made than your choice to marry Otto,” said Mark, which made me remember the time Otto first courted me. I couldn’t help but break out in a smile.

“To this day, I consider that one of my bolder choices.”



I met Otto for the first time six months before I reached adulthood, a quite busy period of time in my life.

The details varied by guild, but generally one had to complete certain tasks to be recognized as the head of a workshop. Such was the case for my guild, the Tailors’ Guild. Their tasks were to receive over five orders for clothes within a single year, and on top of that, to have a member of the nobility as a customer.

These tasks could not be completed by a minor. However, Benno had promised to entrust me with our late mother’s workshop if I were

to complete them. Thus, even in childhood I strived with desperation to master my crafts, in hopes of becoming the head of the workshop my mother left behind.

“At third bell today, Mr. Otto will come for a visit.” At breakfast, Mark was listing out our plans for today. My brother ate breakfast while listening to him in what had become a familiar morning sight for our family.

“What store does this Otto own? I don’t believe I’m familiar with that name.”

“Otto’s not from this city. He’s a traveling merchant. Still pretty young, just reached adulthood not too long ago, but he’s got an eye for products and takes after his parents. Though it sounds like he’s gonna be quitting and settling down.”

Otto’s parents had finally saved enough money to buy citizenship in a city near Frobetag and start a stable store. He could buy his own citizenship for half-price there since his parents lived there. He had saved up plenty of money himself, and planned to follow their example.

As he would likely never visit Ehrenfest again, he visited the store the other day to do business one last time and say his farewells, but Benno had been absent. He was returning today to give a proper farewell.

“I would like to meet a traveling merchant myself. I can only imagine what tales of the road he would have to offer.”

“You can bring tea and say hello, but be mindful that Otto’s a busy man.”

I had never left the city before, so I found myself interested in one who had. Out of curiosity, I decided to bring tea and visit him.

Third bell rang. Otto arrived soon after and upon being informed of this by Mark, I took a tray of tea to Benno’s office on the first floor.

“I’d like to buy a store in Ehrenfest and settle down here, but just buying my citizenship would take all I have. Wouldn’t be able to buy a store afterward.”

“Yeah, everything is expensive here in Ehrenfest since the local lord lives here. Citizenship, investing in opening a store, registering with the Merchants’ Guild... Yeah, that’d take a lot of money. You always brought good thread with you and it’ll be a shame to lose a good supplier like you, but good luck to you, friend.”

I opened the door smoothly as I listened to their conversation. The young man talking to my brother was unmistakably Otto. He had olive-brown hair and light-brown eyes. Maybe due to his history of traveling, he looked more muscular than the merchants I was used to seeing. More muscular than the merchants, but still more slender than the guards at the gate. He looked like a sincere fellow, but he was a

merchant favored by my brother, so there was no doubting that he had a dark side to him.

"I have brought tea." I put on my politest smile and carried the tea inside. Otto replied "Thanks" and looked up, then froze with shock in his eyes after seeing me.

"Otto, this is my little sister, Corinna. She insisted on dropping by to see you. Something about wanting to hear stories of your... Otto? You there?" My brother waved his hands in front of Otto's eyes.

Otto snapped back to reality and shook his head, blinking rapidly. His brown eyes then started shining as if he had found the world's greatest treasure and an oddly sweet smile formed on his face. "Corinna? That's a pretty name. I think it's perfect for a sophisticated, graceful girl like you."

"Th-Thank you very much." He was... a strange man. It wasn't rare for men to compliment me on a first meeting, but his complete change in attitude from moments prior felt a little uncomfortable. His eyes were almost feverish, and I didn't quite like it.

"Benno, I've fallen in love with your sister. Please allow me to marry Corinna!" His sudden proposal stunned me. I had no idea what this man was thinking.

A merchant usually pursued marriage by hearing about the various benefits and lifestyles that marriage with certain women would entail from their parents, then selecting one of those women. The parents of the two would then discuss marriage, and once everyone was on the same page, the woman would be informed of the proposal.

The two would date for a season, deepening their bond and in the process learning whether the rumors about the other were true, whether they would uphold their promises, whether they were honest, and so on. If there were no problems, they would prepare for marriage. I had never heard of a merchant proposing directly to a woman with no prior discussion.

"...Otto, Corinna is still a minor. She's not old enough to get married. Are you having a laugh?" My brother glared at Otto with his dark-red eyes. That was also an important fact: Only adults could get married. Minors could not be courted.

However, Otto did not bend beneath my brother's glare and merely shook his head. "No, I'm completely serious. I won't be coming back to this city, so now is my only time to court her. I'll be fine with just an engagement. I'll come get her as soon as she's old enough!" Otto's eyes were deadly serious, leaving no doubt that he was being absolutely sincere. If he waited to do this until he had returned to his parents' home and set up his new shop, there was the chance that I would reach adulthood and be courted by other men. He hoped to

establish an engagement before then.

“No. Corinna isn’t leaving Ehrenfest.”

“But why?!”

My brother frowned bitterly. It wasn’t known to the public, but the Gilberta Company belonged to the female side of the family. Benno was managing it now since our parents had passed away and I was underage, but I was still its heir. But even if I weren’t, I was in the middle of working to become a workshop head here. I had no intention of leaving my store behind to live in another city.

“Um, forgive my rudeness good Otto, but my work is in Ehrenfest and I plan to own a workshop here. I seek a marriage partner that lives in this city and will not interfere with my work.”

“No way...” Otto’s face clouded with despair, and I felt as if I had said something quite cruel. He was so depressed that my heart hurt, even for a stranger. But my position would not change.

“That’s how it is. Too bad, maybe you’ll find a girl you like in your parents’ city.”

“No girl will be as perfect as Corinna is! I’ve seen the world as a traveling merchant and this is the first time I’ve ever seen my ideal woman!”

It was to my knowledge the first time a man had fallen for me, and I admit that my heart fluttered at his stunningly direct proposal, but I shook my head and turned him down. “I appreciate your words, but I cannot marry you.”

“I understand...” Otto slumped his shoulders and left. Once the door shut behind him, Benno and I looked at each other at the same time.

“I’ve never seen Otto act like that before in my life. You sure you should’ve turned him down? Might’ve been the chance of a lifetime.” My brother grinned teasingly, then continued on in a murmur, “Though I don’t intend to let anyone take you out of the city.”

“And I don’t intend to leave the city.”

Then came the next day. Otto visited the Gilberta Company once again. With his brown eyes shining, he was smiling a bright smile that made his depression yesterday seem like a dream.

“I bought citizenship here yesterday. I’m now a member of the city. Benno, please allow me to marry Corinna!”

“...What?”

“...Huh?”

Both Benno and I froze at his unexpected declaration. Ehrenfest citizenship was exorbitantly expensive. It wasn’t something you bought on a whim.

Benno’s eyes, which had been shut tightly in frustration, shot open, and he abandoned the polite smile he wore for business

partners. "You bought citizenship here? Didn't you say you were going to use that money to buy citizenship in your parents' city and open a shop there?! Do you not think before you act, fool?!"

"I'm fine being a fool! What's the point of citizenship and a store there if I'm not married to Corinna?! If you ask me which one's more important, I won't even hesitate to answer!"

...Unbelievable. Considering my family, my employees, and my standing in the Merchants' Guild, it would be unthinkable for me to marry a traveling merchant. Citizenship or not, marriage was out of the question.

"Otto... You aiming to steal my store?"

"No. If Corinna can't leave this city, then I have no choice but to live here myself. That's all there is to it."

"Hate to break it to you, but my store's not gonna hire a traveling merchant. How are you gonna support yourself now that you've spent all your money on citizenship? You think I'm going to hire you? Or are you just gonna try to live off Corinna?"

What future did a former traveling merchant have in a city where he had nothing to his name but citizenship? Without an introduction from an associate, he would have nowhere to work. Marriage would be the least of his worries.

"...I'll be back." Gritting his teeth and clenching his fists with frustration, Otto turned his back and left. I watched him go with my brother, feeling even worse than I did yesterday about shooting down his sincere feelings for me.

"Well, Corinna? Looks like a weirdo's obsessed with you now."

"I will marry the man I see most fit to inherit this store with me."

"Alright then." Benno's expression hardened and he jerked his head toward the table. I understood that as a sign to sit for a serious discussion, and so I did.

Benno took out a board with a thoroughly displeased expression and held it out to me. It was a letter from the guildmaster requesting a meeting to discuss a marriage proposal.

"...Turns out the guildmaster heard about all this. His youngest son proposed to you this morning." I knew the son to whom Benno referred. In the past he persistently courted my elder sister.

...I'd rather not marry him. Those were my sincere thoughts. The guildmaster was a petty man who proposed to my mother in the immediate wake of my father's death, and upon being refused, began harassing us in small but infuriating ways. To make matters worse, when my Benno's lover died, he proposed a marriage with one of his own daughters. My brother refused, furious of course, and the guildmaster proceeded to propose a marriage between his son and my elder sister. As one might expect from the prior events, she was quite

firm in turning him down.

"You can avoid marrying the guildmaster's son by marrying someone else, but you'll have a hard time finding any merchant that'll risk getting on the guildmaster's bad side over this. But you already know all that."

My elder sister would not budge on her refusal to marry the guildmaster's son and ultimately had no choice but to wed in another city. But I was the heir of a store; I could not leave the town. If no one would propose to me for fear of the guildmaster's wrath, then I truly would be forced to marry his son.

The next day came, and I was depressed for obvious reasons. Eventually, Otto came visiting again with an unrepentant smile and enthusiastic waving. He was not wearing his merchant's clothes from the day before and instead was dressed in the uniform of the city guard.

"I asked an associate of mine for a work introduction and joined the city guard, gate watch. Now will you believe that I'm after Corinna and not the store? Please permit me to marry her." He had found a job in a mere day.

Naturally, Benno could only look at Otto with a stunned exasperation. "Otto, how would you even pay for the marriage at this point?"

"Corinna is still a minor. I'll just make the money before she reaches adulthood. Shouldn't be a problem."

"Good Otto, have you considered the possibility of giving up on my hand in marriage?"

"Not once, not ever." He looked at me with utterly sincere eyes. I couldn't help but laugh.

"If you were to marry me, your life as a merchant would be over forever. I would have to decline a proposal from the guildmaster's son, earning you his ire. You will never be able to join the Gilberta Company, nor will you be able to start a store of your own, I imagine." I could see Otto looking at me with surprise and my brother, eyes open wide, trying to stop me. I held up a hand to restrain my dear brother and continued. "Your entire life up until now will become wasted. Does this not give you pause?"

"It won't be wasted. It's because I lived as a traveling merchant that I got to meet you, Corinna. I might be afraid of the guildmaster's authority if I had been raised a merchant in this city, but I'm not bound by any lands. I'm not afraid of him. Though I might be afraid of putting your store in a bad situation with him," added Otto.

However, our persistent rejection of his marriage proposals had already put us on his bad side, so there was little need to worry about that.

“...You are truly a helpless fellow, I see. In which case, I do request that you prepare savings for when I come of age. And rather soon, I might add, such that I do not end up wed to the guildmaster’s son.”

“What?! Does that mean... A-Alright. I’ll save up the money, no matter what!” Otto clenched his fist with a joyous expression, and after giving me a light kiss on the cheek, burst out of the room. It was hard to imagine he had been leaving with slumped shoulders just yesterday.

Surprised at his sudden behavior, I watched him go with a hand pressed against my cheek, and soon heard my brother call my name in a low voice. I turned to him with a calm business smile. Not even his harsh glare could put a frown on my face.

“Brother, I will marry Otto if he saves up enough money for the wedding and such. It may seem that he has cornered himself by buying citizenship with his savings, but in truth he has prepared a job for himself while working as a traveling merchant. He has a greedy enough nature to do anything to obtain what he wants, the ability to make decisions that make use of all his resources in the blink of an eye, and the confidence to earn a large quantity of money in a short period of time. I imagine these are not traits you dislike?” I said with a bright smile, causing my brother to click his tongue rudely. It seemed that he was indeed fond of Otto.

“...Not to mention, I find it hard to imagine that another man would pursue me so rigorously in spite of the guildmaster’s influence.” I shrugged, and my brother’s harsh expression softened. With a grin that suggested he had given up interfering, he silently ruffled my hair.



“I chose Otto on that day because he was the better choice when compared to the guildmaster’s son. I truly believe that was the correct choice. And to this day, I regret that I closed the doors on Otto’s life as a merchant.”

“...As of late, Benno has become increasingly busy, and in turn I have more often seen Otto visiting the store to take care of miscellaneous tasks. I believe that in the near future, your fears may be proven unnecessary,” Mark replied. I truly felt as if his words had brightened my heart and my world. If he was correct, my joy would be indescribable. “I recall that my brother said that he would think about marriage after I was wed. I do believe it is about time for him to make good on those words.”

“I feel that Benno will only get busier as Myne introduces new products to him, so marriage might be out of the question for some time,” said Mark with a laugh.

“If my brother cannot find a wife due to this, perhaps I shall have Myne take responsibility?” I suggested with laughter of my own.

Mark briefly fell into thought with a serious expression, then replied, “I cannot recommend that considering Myne’s poor health.”

Gossiping by the Well

“Okay, Mom. I’m going to go wash the dishes.”

“Thank you, Tuuli.”

After finishing breakfast, Tuuli took the dirty dishes and headed to the well. I opened the door and saw her off, then sighed and walked straight to the bedroom.

Today was Earthday, which meant that both I and my daughter Tuuli were off work, but my soldier husband Gunther had the morning shift. He had already left so as to take his place at the gate before it opened at second bell. Once Myne and Tuuli left to go gather in the forest, I planned to do the laundry then preserve the food we bought yesterday for the winter.

Everyone was already setting out, but Myne was still rolling around in bed and showing no signs of getting up. “Would you wake up already, Myne?! Second bell has already rung. Aren’t you going to the forest with Tuuli and Lutz today?”

“Uh huuuh. I’m goiinn’...” Myne struggled out of bed, looking sleepy, and started washing her face. She was already bathing enough that it was beyond me why she felt the need to go out of her way and wash her face each morning. Myne’s hatred of being dirty was so extreme that it was something of a joke among the neighborhood wives.

“Myne, you can wash your face later. Focus on finishing your breakfast first.”

“...Okay.” She pouted a bit, looking unhappy, but she quickly bundled her hair up with a stick. With a little heave ho, she climbed up the chair closest to the hearth and began eating breakfast. Myne was late to wake up and slow to eat — nothing would get done if I waited for her to eat breakfast.

“Tuuli’s already gone to the well to clean dishes. I’ll be following her soon after to do laundry. You may use the water in the jug, so please try to wash your own dishes once you’re done eating.”

“Okaaay.” I listened to Myne’s sleepy reply from behind as I picked up a basket packed with dirty clothes and made my way outside. Cold air immediately blew against me.

“It certainly got cold early this year.” The wind was getting colder as autumn went on. I speedily walked down the steps and shuddered at the thought of how cold the well water would be.

Excluding soldiers like Gunther, the majority of people had Earthday off. The well was surrounded by a number of wives, all doing laundry and cleaning dishes.

"Hi, Mom." Tuuli stopped cleaning dishes to wave at me. "I'll go to the forest once I'm done with the dishes. Did Myne wake up?"

"She's eating breakfast right now."

"Myne's always so slow. Doesn't she know Lutz is coming to see her?" she said with a pout as she gathered up the dishes. "I'll go hurry her up and start getting ready myself. The things I do for her..."

Lately, Tuuli had been taking such good care of her sister that I had to question whether Myne was so lazy in the morning because she knew Tuuli would be there for her. I could imagine that some of it had to do with Myne getting healthier and learning her limits. In the past, she had always just cried and said it wasn't fair that only Tuuli got to go outside, but now she sincerely complimented her sister for being capable of doing so many things she couldn't.

There was no mistaking that Tuuli was absolutely overjoyed that she could go to the forest with Myne now. Even when she sounded frustrated or exasperated, her expression was soft and her step had a brisk skip in it. I was just glad they were getting along.

"Tuuli is such a lovely little girl, working hard and even taking care of her sick little sister."

"Mhm. Tuuli is so perfect I almost find it strange." I responded to my neighbor's praise with a smile and secured a spot for doing laundry. I weaved between the wives toward a slightly open spot and set my basket down with a thump.

"Morning, Effa."

"Good morning, Karla. It's hard to do laundry with so many boys, isn't it?" Beside my basket was one twice its size, filled with dirty clothes that Karla was cleaning at a rapid pace. She let out a sigh and spun her arm in a circle.

"Oh, do I wish I had a girl to help me. What I would do for one of those boys to be a girl instead." Karla was Lutz's mother, and she had four sons she was raising. Sons tended not to help around the house in ways daughters did, and vice versa, so Karla was always complaining about wanting a daughter like Tuuli.

"Tuuli works hard, but you'd be in even more trouble if you ended up with a daughter like Myne," I said, letting Karla's complaints go in one ear and out the other as I took my tub to the well. I needed to fill it with water.

I tensed my arms and drew water. Myne was still too weak to draw water from the well. It took all she had to stumble around with a tiny bucket of water, and after that she would be knocked out for the count.

...Though perhaps she would be fine now, given how much stronger she had gotten? Myne had been weak since birth and caught fevers constantly. She always used to cry out of jealousy for Tuuli, asking me why she wasn't healthy like her sister. I could only apologize.

It seemed that Myne had pleasant dreams whenever she fell asleep with a fever, and she was never as happy as she was when talking about the world of her dreams. She could run around in her dreams without ever getting tired, do anything she wanted, and eat her fill of delicious food. She always spoke of strange things I couldn't understand with her stunted childish words. It got so bad that when she said *"My dreams are so much more fun, I want to stay asleep forever,"* I interpreted it as *"I want to die"* and ended up yelling at her.

...Speaking of which, she no longer talked about her dreams. Myne had stopped talking about her dreams when she grew out of her toddler crybaby phase and entered her rebellious childhood phase. Instead, she started behaving oddly in real life. Though her behavior had settled down bit by bit after she started making paper with Lutz. Myne was growing up, just like any other girl.

After drawing water into the tub about three times, it was full enough for laundry. I took the tub filled with cold water to my secured spot and sat down next to Karla. Once I got my soap and started cleaning, it was time for our usual gossiping by the well.

"Myne's going to the forest today, isn't she? I've been worried for a long time that her weak body and constant fevers would kill her before long, but it sounds like she's getting a lot better."

"It's thanks to Lutz watching over her all the time. We owe him so much." Myne, despite being dead weight to the others, could go to the forest and gather with her small basket thanks to Lutz. She could also make paper and hairpins to sell thanks to Lutz. There was no doubt that she would have been unable to do anything on her own without his help.

"Mmm, I guess Lutz is doing some good out there after all. He's a hard-head that won't stop being silly about being a merchant and stuff despite how much he's worrying us, so it feels a bit strange to hear others compliment him like that," said Karla with a shrug. He might have been a pain to his parents, but to me, Lutz was such a good kid that I would have liked to have him as my own son. "Lutz is always kind to Myne and takes good care of her."

"That's because Myne introduced him to a merchant, right? And they're selling paper, or whatever? He was making weird wooden sticks earlier, too. I can appreciate the money he's earning, but why not just become a paper-making craftsman? I just don't get why he's so obsessed with being a merchant in particular. It's got to be Myne,

don't you think?"

"Who can say? I was surprised myself when Myne came back with a merchant apprenticeship on her own. I heard that she got the introduction from a former traveler merchant that works under Gunther, but I hadn't expected the merchant to actually accept them." I had assumed that Myne was going to the gate with Gunther just to do paperwork, so imagine my surprise when she told me that she had locked in an apprenticeship with a wealthy merchant.

"I just don't know what Lutz sees in merchants. Bunch of conniving liars those lot are, if you ask me."

"They're getting paid properly for their work and he's supplying their materials, so I can't imagine that he's anything but a just man." He had paid a stunning amount of money for the fancy hairpins. Myne and Lutz always spoke of their business with smiles, and when Myne collapsed with a fever, an incredibly well dressed man came to apologize profusely. It was hard for me to think that the Gilberta Company was owned by a liar or a cheat.

"If you say so, Effa, I can believe he's a good merchant. But I'm still worried. Who would want to work at an unstable job like that, willingly?"

"Boys will be boys. It's not uncommon for them get inspired by tales of traveling merchants and minstrels. Even Gunther had a phase when he wanted to leave the city and go exploring. Maybe you should just be glad that Lutz has decided to become a proper merchant rather than a traveling one?"

"Well, I'd rather him be a soldier like Gunther, really. Better than a merchant or a traveling merchant. In the first place, how's a carpenter's son gonna be a merchant? He can't read or do math, how's he gonna work? Lutz is just gonna get fired on the first day. That means he'll be a season or two behind all the other kids working normal jobs."

As a fellow parent, I could understand Karla's fears. But I also understood that Lutz was giving this his all and it wouldn't be right of me to say anything more. I nodded to myself, and then heard Lutz's voice

"Morning, Mrs. Effa. How's Myne? Is she all ready?" I looked up and saw Lutz walking this way, looking ready to head out to the forest.

"Oh, hello, Lutz. Good morning to you too. Tuuli just went home talking about getting Myne ready, so she shouldn't be too long."

"Alright. I'll go up to meet her."

"Thank you as always, Lutz."

Lutz's home was on the other end of the street from ours with the well in between them, so he had to pass by this gaggle of wives to go

between them. The wives called out to him one after another as he marched forward with a somewhat fearful expression.

“Why hello, Lutz. Don’t worry your mother too much.”

“Be sure to help around the house sometimes, don’t just spend all day playing around.”

Scrunching his face up at the wives who had been deluged with complaints from his mother, Lutz tossed back “I know, I know” while passing them by. He sped up his pace and started actually jogging to escape them.

“Youngest sons always end up playing around since they’ve got so many big brothers to take care of them.”

“Lutz will understand once he starts his apprentice work. It’ll be fine, Karla.”

“You think so?”

“It’s not just his brothers that are good kids. Lutz takes care of others too. He’s always looking after Myne, for instance. He’s really a big help to us.” I complimented Lutz further and the wives all shrugged. Lutz was prioritizing taking care of Myne to the point of not looking after anyone else. The wives weren’t in the habit of listening to kids much anyway, they automatically believed Karla and had hardened their opinion of Lutz.

“Later, Mom.”

“Mhm, be sure to gather lots.”

Kids poured out from various homes and headed to the meeting point. It was almost time to go to the forest. Tuuli, Lutz, and Myne left our own building.

“Bye, Mom.”

“Be careful out there.”

Myne waved goodbye to me and started walking off with Lutz in the lead. If she didn’t leave early, she wouldn’t be able to keep up with the other kids.

Once the kids were gone, the wives around all loosened up, as if a burden had been lifted from their shoulders. They were so surprised to see Myne healthy that they began to crowd around me.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve seen her, but it looks like Myne’s able to go to the forest now. Isn’t that nice?”

“It really is. She’s been getting stronger bit by bit for a while now. She still collapses and gets fevers a lot, but she’s hardly as bedridden as she used to be.”

In the past Myne had gone outside maybe once or twice a month, but now you could count on both hands how many days she stayed in bed. Compared to spring when she couldn’t even walk all the way to the gate, she had gotten a lot more healthy.

“Though now that she’s healthy she’s started doing all sorts of

weird things, and it's a struggle to keep up with her." With amusement, I told the interested wives tales of Myne's odd behavior.

The time she grabbed a broom, determined to clean, and passed out before finishing sweeping the bedroom alone. The time she started doing weird jumps and counting, then collapsed before reaching ten. The time she secretly put clay bricks into the hearth and made them explode. The time she cleaned the hearth to get the soot and fell unconscious inside of it. When it came to Myne, I would never run out of things to talk about.

"Last year, Myne put herbs into the candles without my knowledge and that certainly turned into a mess. The candles with *gierecht* and *redrum* herbs stunk so much we had to open the windows during a blizzard to ventilate."

The wives burst out in laughter.

"That sounds like a disaster. You'll have to keep an eye on her this time."

"Mhm, but the *smimosa* and *demple* herbs did improve the smell somewhat. If you all want to try it out, I would suggest using those two."

"I would never put herbs in candles. If I have any to spare, I'll just use them for something else."

I tried to tell them of the accidental success that Myne's weirdness accomplished, but nobody seemed interested in putting more time into their candles than they had to.

"Sounds like you have your hands full with both Gunther and Myne now, hm? Must be rough."

"I've given up on it. What else should I expect from Gunther's daughter? It would be stranger if Myne didn't do anything weird." I shrugged and the wives laughed again. Truth be told, I had just as many stories about Gunther as I did about Myne. More people here knew about Gunther's antics than Myne's, for obvious reasons.

"Gunther's like a kid who grew up without ever learning to tell dreams and reality apart." Gunther, the child of a woodworker, had been inspired by minstrel tales of knights to become a knight himself. That wasn't too uncommon for kids, but only nobles could become knights. Kids had no choice but to give up in the face of reality. That was the point where normal children learned that minstrel tales were just fantasies, separate from reality.

But Gunther didn't give up. He ignored the jobs his parents offered to introduce him to and decided on his own to be a soldier. He charged to the gate and informed the commander there that if he couldn't become a knight, he would become a soldier that protected the city instead. Just like that, he became an apprentice soldier. And by the way, that commander was my father.

When the soldiers went out to kill rampaging feybeasts, he put his all into hunting more of them than the other soldiers, and felt overwhelming frustration if he failed. On the inside, he was still just a kid. An average soldier wouldn't get a job for a traveling merchant who just bought his citizenship the day before.

...And Myne wasn't normal either, given how she received a work introduction from that merchant at Lutz's request. Like father, like daughter.

I had been surprised when she got a work introduction from Gunther's subordinate without consulting us, but I was even more surprised when she put her all into the interview and came back as a future apprentice merchant herself. That kind of thing didn't happen with normal children. The way she negotiated and secured an apprenticeship for herself with a merchant who didn't know her parents was very much like something Gunther would do. She may look like me on the outside, but she didn't have much of me on the inside.

Both of them charged straight toward their goals without caring too much about their surroundings, so to speak. I often told both of them to calm down a little. In other words... it was definitely all Gunther's fault that Myne was acting so weird. Definitely.

"Still, though, what in the world drove you to marry Gunther, Effa? With sewing skills like yours I bet you weren't lacking for options." As the daughter of a soldier, it was expected of me to become a wife that supported a soldier. Most of my suitors were my neighbors and soldiers from my father's place of work, but yes, I had many options.

"...It's a long story." I let out a sigh and shook my head in an attempt to ignore the subject, but Karla grinned in amusement.

"I know what happened. Gunther fell in love with Effa at first sight and went after her every single day."

"Aaah, I can see that happening."

Gunther always charged straight for his goal and he did indeed visit our home every single day, asking my father for my hand in marriage. He eventually wore my father down with persistence and passion until he eventually permitted it. *"If Effa chooses you, I will allow the marriage,"* he said.

...At the time, I was mainly annoyed that he was making me deal with Gunther myself.

"So Gunther's daily wooing eventually won Effa over?"

"Ahaha, makes sense to me. Gunther just never gives up."

The wives roared with laughter and began discussing what Gunther had probably said to me, listing off lines like you would hear from a minstrel's stories. I shrugged as I heard the wives rattle off

pickup line after pickup line.

“Which one’s right, Effa?” Karla looked at me, holding a hand over her mouth as she laughed.

Goodness, enough of this already! I puffed up my cheeks a little in frustration at everyone’s teasing and raced to finish up my laundry, throwing the clothes back into the basket.

“Oh, trying to run away?”

“Don’t even think about it. It’s not every day a topic this fun pops up.”

As I felt the throng of wives tightening around me, I flipped my tub over to empty it of water.

“Effa, c’mon, at least tell us who was right.”

“He must have said at least one of those lines, right?”

I tossed my basket and soap into the tub and lifted it up with me as I stood. “You’re all right. I remember hearing all of those lines from him.” I left it at that and dashed right for my building while hearing the wives roaring with laughter behind me.

Aaah... So embarrassing... But nobody had said the line that truly won me over, so they could laugh as much as they wanted.

I returned home and dried my laundry. First Tuuli’s clothes, then Myne’s aprons, then Gunther’s work clothes. I spread them out to dry and remembered what Gunther had said to me. Inspired by tales of knights in minstrel stories as he was, he had mimicked a knight when courting me. He got on one knee before me and held up a magic stone he had obtained after slaying a feybeast.

“I became a soldier because I genuinely want to protect this city and my family. You didn’t laugh at that, Effa, and I love you for it. I want you by my side.”

The fact that made my heart thump and fall for him perhaps makes me as much of a dreamer as he is.

Afterword

Hello again. It's me, Miya Kazuki. Thank you very much for reading *Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 1 Volume 2*.

At the time of me writing this, the first volume has not been published. I've been continuing publishing the web novel with my heart pounding in excitement for the release of the first published volume, coming in one week from my perspective.

But in any case, Myne obtained the help of a merchant in Volume 1, and in Volume 2 she used that help to reach a point where she could make paper. Her circumstances from the past volume changed quite significantly thanks to having the active help of an adult. Here we saw her first big step toward making books.

While making paper, Lutz accused her of not being Myne, then ultimately accepted her as "his" Myne. I view this as the point where Urano can start finally living as Myne in full. She can now learn more about the world and how to properly live in it by having Lutz point out when she's acting weird.

It's hard to tell when you're being weird if you don't have someone to point it out. Especially since Myne was already a little—well, very weird, even back in her Urano days.

Just like last time, I wrote two short stories original to these printed novels. A tale of Otto's marriage from Corinna's perspective, and a tale of Effa falling in love with Gunther wherein we get a glimpse into her thoughts on Myne and Lutz. I decided on these after looking through requests sent to me by readers of the web novel. I hope they were enjoyable. The Effa story in particular is special, as I have not yet written anything from her perspective in the web novel. Which is why I received so many requests for it, and why I tried to pack as much into it as I could to satisfy those who requested it.

I've been quite busy with the printing of these novels, but I think the publishing staff are even busier than I am. Thank you very much, everyone at TO Books.

I also cannot forget to show my utmost appreciation to Shiina You, who quickly responds to all my requests and thoughts on her character designs and illustrations despite being so busy as it is. Thank you very much.

And finally, I would like to offer my greatest gratitude to all of you who read this book.

The third volume is planned to be printed soon. May we meet again then.







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2 Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 1 Daughter of a Soldier Volume
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